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Eat or be Eaten?

食うか食われるか



Yaoi  Novel

Eat or be Eaten



"I wanted to drive you crazy and then...eat you up, but...it looks like you're going to eat me instead."

"Nngh!"

Tsubaki laughed, thrusting in even deeper.

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I have two dogs, both of whom are really sensitive to the cold. During the winter, they'll crawl into bed with anyone. They become natural heaters and make me more comfortable. Then in the summer, they sprawl on top of the sheets on their backs.

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Chapter One

When it came to winning people over, Masaki Ashizawa was a battle-hardened veteran.

That makes him sound like a playboy, but he wasn't in the business of wooing women. It wasn't relationships that he was trying to talk people into.

Ashizawa worked for a management consulting agency and used his charms on people in business negotiations. His specialty was franchise projects for restaurants. There wasn't a single restaurant in his care that didn't prosper; his record was almost perfect for rehabilitating restaurants after a downturn in business.

When his clients had no idea what they needed to do, that made Ashizawa's job that much easier: the client accepted his every suggestion without ever needing to be convinced.

Of course, he never neglected the background research. Market data was indispensable, but Ashizawa also extensively investigated his clients' attitudes and compiled data to understand their strengths and weaknesses. He used exactly the same methodology for businesses as he did for individuals. Between his thorough analysis of the data and his readiness to adapt, he often understood his clients better than they did themselves.

There were some who said he valued the data

above all else; but since that was what had made him a success, Ashizawa never let the critics bother him.

Some said that his medium build and slender outline in a suit, combined with his willowy face, made him look like a character from teen romances. With his long eyelashes, pale white skin, and softly blushing lips, he was a refreshing breeze among all the stern businessmen.

Ashizawa was perfectly aware of the impression he made. But he insisted it was only an appearance. He was a respected businessman and possessed a flinty, straightforward personality. His world offered only two choices for anything: love or hate, win or lose, yes or no. He hated when things were left unclear.

He had a serene speaking style which, combined with his feminine looks, made it easy to overlook the fact that he was at heart a brutal realist with a sharp tongue. That was another thing that made him famous among consultants.

For some time now, Ashizawa had been mulling over a problem. Once he decided to do something, he threw himself into it headlong. He would spare no effort in order to succeed, so he ought to have wrapped this one up in a snap, but it just wasn't happening.

But at this moment, Ashizawa was instead intently focused on the mouth-watering roast beef sitting on his plate, just the sight of which made life seem worth living. It came with a *ris de veau* herb-grilled sweetbread and scallion sauce, with steamed carrots and bright green spinach on the side. The vegetables had been lightly seasoned with salt and pepper, giving them a delightful taste.

Ashizawa cut the tender meat with the barest pass of his knife. He smeared it with some sauce, speared a clump of spinach and brought the sample to his mouth. It had a mellow aroma; the meat and sauce had the most exquisite taste he'd ever experienced.

"This is incredible."

He couldn't keep his feelings to himself, letting slip these simple words.

It wasn't just the meat that was so masterfully prepared, either. The *terriner de foie gras* he'd had as an appetizer, the freshly baked bread, and the dessert were all uniformly excellent. And Ashizawa wasn't the only one to derive such pleasure from his meal. The customers at the tables around him all ate with contented smiles on their faces.

Ashizawa had first come to this restaurant, Individu, one month ago. The restaurant's name meant "individual" in French.

He had come back often after his first visit, sometimes as often as three times in one week, other times only once for lunch or dinner. He had sampled just about everything on the menu and it was all, without exception, delicious.

In his job as restaurant consultant, Ashizawa believed he had eaten every cuisine under the sun, from the so-called *grande maisons*, the five-star French restaurants, to the outdoor grills on the sidewalk. For that reason, he believed that he reacted not with his own personal tastes, but rather from a neutral ground to decide if food was good or bad.

But as far as this restaurant was concerned, he

could imagine no verdict other than "incredible."

The first time, he'd thought his reaction might have been swayed by hunger or perhaps someone had influenced his opinion ahead of time. But when he came back a week later with a more normal level of hunger, the food had been even more delicious than the first time.

Thereafter, though he was brought back partly by stubbornness, the more he ate of the restaurant's food the more he fell in love with it. A handsome waiter who bore himself with perfect, refreshing ease recognized him after several visits, and began to recommend what would be best each day with expert panache. The wine he suggested to accompany each meal was chosen for its fair price and its ability to highlight the cuisine.

The restaurant's atmosphere was likewise impeccable.

It was not at all large. There were five square tables that could accommodate four people each, and two circular tables for two.

It was designed to look like a bistro somewhere in the French countryside, with walls covered in brick and tile. The furnishings were all chocolate brown, with the occasional wine barrel, casually arranged flowers, and impressionistic paintings of gently rolling landscape. Everything worked toward a unified image. Nothing about the place was pretentious. Ashizawa had never seen anything like it before.

He'd thought he had eaten delicious food, but the impression had never been coaxed out of his very heart before. It was almost like falling in love. The comparison

embarrassed him and he quickly buried it in his mind, but he couldn't think of a better way to describe it.

What had he fallen in love with?

Of course the food, and everything else about the restaurant. But also the person who had conceived of both of those things.

That knowledge gave him the courage today, at last, to wave over the waiter who knew him and ask to see the chef. The waiter looked troubled, as if that might be difficult to arrange, but he went into the kitchen to ask.

When the waiter came back, he whispered in Ashizawa's ear, "The chef can see you once the restaurant closes for lunch."

Ashizawa was elated to hear this. He had never once seen the chef.

Apparently the man believed his food should speak for itself. Ashizawa had looked through many magazines, but never seen a picture of the chef. Sometimes he eavesdropped on other regular customers, from whom he understood that the number of people who had seen the man's face could be counted on one hand.

Soon he was going to meet him. Just the thought sent tension coursing through Ashizawa's body.

"Thank you for waiting, Ashizawa-san."

Hearing the chef's voice, Ashizawa set down his knife and fork and wiped his mouth with his napkin. Then he stood up and raised his eyes.

"I'm sorry to take you away from your work. I'm Masaki Ashizawa."

"A pleasure."

The chef had a deeply-resonant baritone voice.

Ashizawa bowed at the waist so he saw only the man's black shoes. Black pants peeked out from behind a white apron. As he slowly straightened, he saw the face of the man standing in front of him. He had a thick chest and broad shoulders, which his chef's coat flattered. His long, thick neck stretched out above his shoulders, holding aloft a face so strikingly handsome that Ashizawa almost gasped.

He had thick, willful eyebrows and his eyes were remarkable with their downcast look that seemed almost melancholy.

"I'm Shuichiro Tsubaki, head chef and owner of this restaurant."

He introduced himself quietly and inclined his head, which was a few inches higher than Ashizawa's.

"You wanted to speak with me?"

He wasn't especially domineering, but just standing there, he carried an aura of authority. He spoke awkwardly, with little inflection and...was that—? He sounded almost scared. Ashizawa's mind went blank.

He summoned his courage to speak. But nothing came out.

His silence made the chef uncomfortable and he stroked his angular chin. Hypnotized by the beauty of his fingers, Ashizawa reached forward mindlessly with one of the hands that had been balled into tense fists at his sides.

He quickly grabbed the man's hands in both of his own. "Would you be mine?"

"Er?"

The chef cocked his head at this stupidity and several moments went by in silence before Ashizawa realized he must have said something strange.

Holding both the man's hands and then asking him to be *his*? It sounded like he was hitting on him. And there was no way to pass this off as a joke now.

Ashizawa dropped his hands back to his sides and hurried to correct himself. "No, I mean—I'm sorry. I skipped over a lot there. What I wanted to say was, would you like to work with me as a partner and open a new French restaurant?"

The chef stared at him in surprise for a long moment, then finally lost control and burst out laughing. He held his sides and doubled over with the force of his laughter.

After graduating from high school, Shuichiro Tsubaki had enrolled in a culinary academy, then gone to train in France. Two years ago he'd opened Individu in a quiet neighborhood in Tokyo, a five minute walk from Kunitachi station. That much was written in his entry in restaurant guides.

The simple, vibrant, unpretentiously genuine flavor enchanted people's taste buds and the restaurant's reputation spread by word of mouth.

Ashizawa had been hearing about this place for a long time.

And it was, after all, in Kunitachi.

Though the restaurant was in the heart of the French restaurant district, it had a reputation for the number of older rich women in its clientèle, so Ashizawa initially had no real interest in going. In fact, he had only come on a whim the first time. He had to go to Hachioji for business and on the way home he'd thought of Individu. Ashizawa was just in time for the end of lunch and had simply decided to give it a try.

"Can I start over?"

He waited a while for Tsubaki to stop laughing, then the two sat down at a table in the back. Tsubaki took off his white apron, or *tablier*, and hung it over the back of the chair beside him. He stretched his legs out in front of him and crossed them at the ankles.

Ashizawa coughed politely, then presented his card.

"A management consultant?"

Tsubaki's smile disappeared immediately. Ashizawa saw that, but carried on with his introduction.

"Yes. I work for the A&6 Agency. Masaki Ashizawa."

Ashizawa stared intently at Tsubaki's face as he, in turn, stared intently at Ashizawa's card.

He wasn't classically attractive, but he was manly and handsome. It almost seemed like he wore his heart on his sleeve since his face was so stern and honest. But there was also something pleasant, which became more obvious when he smiled.

"I mentioned this before, but we have plans to open a French restaurant in town next spring."

Ashizawa brought his breathing under control



and put on his business face. "The concept is to allow a young French chef to make the best food he can. The restaurant's owner is also a French chef, but he won't be putting his name on it because he's so famous. I'm helping to get everything ready for the grand opening. Would you be interested in working as the restaurant's head chef?"

Ashizawa took some documents out of his bag.

"The new restaurant will be much bigger than this one. We would decide on the furnishings and tableware in consultation with you—the owner will have very little input in general about these things. You would be free to do as you wished. Money would be no object."

"No."

"What?"

Tsubaki interrupted Ashizawa's presentation, his earlier humor gone from his face. He was frowning, looking at Ashizawa sourly.

"But—"

"I said no."

Tsubaki crossed his arms in front of his chest and leaned back in his chair, his frown growing deeper as he glared straight at Ashizawa.

Ashizawa faltered, but he couldn't give up now and ever hope to succeed. He forced a smile.

"But we haven't yet discussed the restaurant's concept. You should hear my offer out before deciding."

"I'm proud of the work I do in my restaurant."

He wasn't yelling, but his voice was firm.

"I don't want someone else taking advantage of

me in their restaurant."

Tsubaki set Ashizawa's card on the table and slid it back to him across the tablecloth.

"I'm quite happy with what I have here. I wouldn't need someone else's help to expand my restaurant if that's what I wanted to do."

Tsubaki was upset. Ashizawa realized that he had wounded the man's pride. He bowed quickly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't explain very well. Of course I respect your wish to remain independent. You have an incredible restaurant here. When I tasted your food, I knew I had to have you for the project. A restaurant's substance depends on the chef. This won't be a spin-off of the owner's restaurant. It isn't what you imagine."

"I don't care about your restaurant's substance. I'm not going to work for someone else's handouts."

Tsubaki stood up, looking grim.

"I'm sorry, but I need to start getting ready for the dinner shift. Good day."

"Wait!"

Ashizawa grabbed Tsubaki's arm. If he let him walk away now, these past fretful months would be for nothing.

"It was rude of me to spring this on you out of nowhere. But I deeply respect your cooking, Tsubaki-san, and I was being honest when I said I wanted to work with you to open a new restaurant. Please try to understand how I feel."

"That's not fair," Tsubaki growled. He walked back to the kitchen.

"Tsubaki-san!"

Ashizawa called out to him, but Tsubaki didn't stop. He pushed open the doors to the kitchen and went inside.

"Now what am I going to do?" Ashizawa held his head and collapsed back into his seat. "I insulted him." He had failed.

What could he possibly do now that he had offended the man he needed before he'd even had a chance to fully explain the project?

Ashizawa had been so sure that he could convince anyone of anything, no matter what the deal. But this time, he'd stumbled right out of the gate.

He realized now what had happened. He had dealt with more consultants from other businesses than he could count, but this was the first time he'd approached someone on his own.

Normally the client would hire a consultant, who would conduct the negotiations from that point forward. Both sides would be professional because their jobs depended on it. They would exchange propositions for one thing or another. Ashizawa's job would be to steer the decision for his client.

So, although it was a little late for such a revelation now, Ashizawa realized that this was the first time he'd begun negotiations with someone who had no reason to trust him.

"I'm such an idiot!"

After eating all of Tsubaki's delicious food, Ashizawa had felt as if he'd known the man personally. He'd figured out otherwise too late.

"Coffee, sir?"

The powerful aroma of coffee tickled Ashizawa's nose. He looked up and saw a plain white cup filled with coffee. The waiter stood beside Ashizawa wearing a white shirt, black vest, and black *tablier*. His hair was neatly pulled back, but it looked like it would be quite long if he let it down.

He wore a pin shaped like grapes on the lapel of his vest, which meant that he was a *sommelier*, or wine expert. On his chest was a name tag that read "Masatsuka."

"I'm sorry for staying so late."

Ashizawa started to rise weakly from his chair. He simply had no strength in his body.

"If you're not in a hurry, please stay and enjoy the coffee before you go. It was made especially for you."

"But—"

"It's from the chef."

Ashizawa looked up at this.

"He worked in a coffee shop when he was a student. He knows everything there is to know about coffee, from roasting the beans to brewing the coffee. I learned this blend from him."

"Is the chef angry?"

Ashizawa looked up at the waiter plaintively.

"No, he's not upset. He's just sulking. Do you mind if I smoke?"

Ashizawa shook his head as the waiter took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"He's sulking?"

"I'm sure you realize that it's quite unusual for the chef to come out into the restaurant."

He opened a window to let a breeze in, then lit his cigarette, inhaling slowly.

"I know."

That was why when Ashizawa had asked to talk to Tsubaki, he had wanted to jump for joy when he'd been told that he could. He'd been so happy that he'd failed to pay close attention to the situation, and that's what had brought him to this current state of affairs.

"Why do you suppose he came out today?"

"It's not because I asked to talk to him?"

Ashizawa brought the cup to his lips gingerly. The heavy aroma of coffee spread through his nostrils.

"He's too uncompromising to come out for a little thing like that."

If the waiter called Tsubaki uncompromising, it must be true.

"Then why—?"

The waiter smiled at Ashizawa's question.

"It won't come as a surprise if I say that the chef's heard about you, since you've been coming here so often in the last month. You've told us a lot about his cooking—both how things taste now and what you'd like to have."

After Ashizawa had come three days in a row, they'd accepted all kinds of requests from him. Not only to leave things out, but even to adjust the taste or portions.

And of course after he'd made the request once, he never had to ask again. It deeply impressed him that the staff could keep track of so many customers' preferences.



"I've told the chef your impressions of the food. The taste of the meat, or how well it goes with the wine, and even about the cheese. Once a customer finds something they like, they'll come back. But even if they only come once, we take their impressions of the food very seriously. And restaurant chefs aren't the only ones. A mother does exactly the same thing. I try to give the chef my impressions every time I eat."

What could Ashizawa say? He stopped sipping at his coffee and listened intently.

"That's why he came out today."

"What do you mean?"

"Basically, I think the chef wanted to meet you too, since you come so often and always say what you think."

"But why?"

"I don't know. Let's just say it was a first for him. He's never done it before, even before he started Individu."

The waiter's cigarette had burned short and he stubbed it out in an ashtray. Ashizawa stared at the stub, wondering what all that had meant.

He didn't remember if he'd given his opinion every time he'd come or not. All he remembered was speaking his mind about how good it was. Eating out had never impressed him so much before. All he did was say so.

But it was because he had heard these opinions that Tsubaki, who had never come out of the kitchen before, had come out for him.

Ashizawa didn't know what Tsubaki had wanted,

not being inside his mind, but he could guess. And as soon as he did, Ashizawa's heart fell.

"Um."

"My name's Masatsuka."

The waiter had noticed Ashizawa's eyes on his name tag and gave his name with a smile before he could ask. Ashizawa said the name twice in his mind, then repeated it aloud.

"Masatsuka-san?"

"Yes?"

"I really do think the chef's food is amazing."

"I think he knows that."

"It's because I like it so much that I want to work with him."

Yes—that was it. That was what he needed to tell him.

About how much the food at Tsubaki's restaurant had captivated him. How much it cheered him up. And that he had been thinking about how to share those feelings with even more people, and the idea he'd hit on was the project he was currently working on.

Though Ashizawa had been enthused by other projects he'd managed, he felt more blessed to have this project than any he'd had before because it would let Tsubaki do exactly what he wanted. But he hadn't given any thought to Tsubaki's preferences or his situation. Ashizawa had put himself first. But his feelings were still honest ones.

Absolutely.

I'm proud of the work I do in my restaurant.

Tsubaki's words echoed in his mind. He was right.

Ashizawa could sense his pride and effort in this place.

Ashizawa loved it for that. He loved the food and the staff. But it stood in the way of something he could do to love it even more. He wanted to see what Tsubaki's pride and effort could accomplish when they were completely unlimited.

He doubted that a man who made food like that and who could stare at him so incisively would be content with this situation for long.

"Thank you for that."

Ashizawa drained the last drop of coffee from his cup, then set it back on the table.

"The coffee was excellent. I'm pretty picky about my coffee, but I would call that expert coffee."

"The chef will be happy to hear that."

"Thank you for talking to me."

Ashizawa paid his bill, then bowed deeply to Masatsuka.

"Don't mention it."

"It helped me a lot," Ashizawa insisted. "If you'd let me go home like that, I never would have come back."

"So you will come back, then?"

Masatsuka smiled meaningfully. Ashizawa knew what his smile meant and he returned it.

"Would that be all right?"

"We're always happy to see our customers come back."

Ashizawa took a business card out of his pocket and handed it to Masatsuka. "I tried to give this to the chef earlier, but he wouldn't accept it. But maybe he

would accept it from me as a customer instead."

"Masaki Ashizawa. Thank you for coming by again."

Masatsuka bowed and accepted the card.

"You work for a consulting agency? You always wear such nice suits, I thought you worked for an export company. I was gossiping about you with the other waiter."

Ashizawa suddenly felt self-conscious about his clothes.

He wasn't a *fashionista*, but his father had always insisted that clothes make the man. He never did it on purpose, but designer suits seemed to gravitate to him. He had his reasons for wearing the suits, but they seemed somehow inappropriate here.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly, sir."

On his way out the door, Ashizawa remembered something and turned back around.

"How many people work here?"

"There's Tsubaki the chef and one sous-chef who helps him in the kitchen, but he's working somewhere else at the moment. Then out on the floor there's me and one other waiter who only works the dinner shift. So four total."

Ashizawa remembered the other waiter. He had a vague, overall impression of a cute, cheerful young guy.

"That's not many."

It was far fewer than the average number of staff that Ashizawa was used to at other restaurants.

"It's certainly not a lot, but in this small a space we

wouldn't be able to move with any more people around. I've suggested adding one more person to the staff, but you saw how the chef can be. He hasn't been very open to the idea."

Ashizawa felt enlightened.

"Well, see you next time," he declared.

"Thank you, sir."

Masatsuka escorted him out and Ashizawa turned around to wave one last time.

Ashizawa walked down the street toward the station building that had been constructed in 1926. He stopped once again and turned back to look at Individu.

He stared at the building, which was covered in brick and tile as if it had been plucked out of the French countryside. The exterior was decorated with well-tended potted plants and he could see attractive European bric-a-brac through the windows.

There was a strange aura about the restaurant that attracted not only romantic young girls, but people of every age and walk of life.

Everyone agreed the food was delicious.

"It has to be him," Ashizawa said once again, sealing the conviction in his heart.

Chapter Two

A few minutes' walk from the Hibiya station, on the twenty-fifth floor of a building next to a very old and famous hotel, was A&6, the agency Ashizawa worked for.

"Welcome back, Ashizawa-san."

Walking down the hall from the elevators and turning right, Ashizawa went through a frosted glass door and passed the receptionist's desk on his way into the office. There were no walls in the large space. Groups of three desks pushed together formed one unit, and the units were separated by partitions.

Ashizawa went to his own desk, and started his computer to check his email.

In his desk's inbox he found a bundle of files that needed his attention. There were also a large number of phone messages piled on his chair. After glancing over all of this, he began returning calls while he checked his new email.

Ashizawa had started working at this agency because his father, Shugo Ashizawa, worked there.

He had heard his father talk about the work ever since he was little and when he'd seen it first-hand, he realized how interesting management consulting could be.

I want to start a business. I want to help my

company to recover after falling on hard times. I want to expand into a new sector. I want an evaluation of my company's current performance.

These were the kinds of requests he handled, each requiring different advice to help realistically guide the business.

Ashizawa was interested in economics, and of course he had majored in it at college. When he graduated, he went to a school in America, then stayed to work for a few years at a consulting agency. There he had gained experience in mergers and acquisitions, and then he had returned to Japan three years ago. He had been working at A&6 ever since.

At first, there had been a lot of gossiping behind his back since his father worked there, too.

Ashizawa's good looks may also have inspired some jealousy.

When he won a project, people said he "got it with his looks," even though people in the industry knew better than anyone that negotiations weren't as simple as that. Or "he got it with his body"; Ashizawa was sure some percentage of Japanese men were gay, but he didn't think it was common enough for that to work.

They also said "he got it with money," but since the whole point of working was for the clients to pay him, he didn't see what would be accomplished by him giving them money.

All of these various bizarre rumors had completely disappeared six months after he started, but it wasn't simply more proof of the old saying that everyone has their fifteen minutes of fame. Rather, Ashizawa's

amazing performance in the six months after he joined shut everyone up. There was no longer anyone who doubted Ashizawa's chops as a consultant.

That included his father.

"I look forward to it, then. Goodbye."

As soon as Ashizawa had finished with the critical phone calls, his father stuck his head over the partition.

Since Ashizawa took after his mother, there weren't many people who could tell they were father and son even when they stood side by side.

"Working hard?"

"Of course." Ashizawa glanced up to see who it was, then turned his attention back to his computer screen.

Ashizawa's father wore an off-the-rack, top-of-the-line Kition suit as if it were a second skin. He was a pioneer in Japanese consulting.

Now that Ashizawa had more experience and his performance record, he looked up to his father. He had left home when he graduated from high school, so they no longer lived together, but they saw each other at the office.

"Do you have any plans for tonight? Got a date with that girl of yours?"

"I'm not sure who you mean. Unfortunately, I'm free."

"Dumped again, huh? If you keep this up, you're never going to land a good wife."

"Don't talk like that. It's embarrassing. And she didn't dump me—I dumped her." Ashizawa glared up at his father out of the corner of his eye.

He was competent and good-looking, and he earned a good wage, so women didn't exactly stay away from him. Ashizawa had even had girlfriends in high school. But he didn't have much use for romance and he wasn't the type of person to go out of his way for his girlfriends, so none of them stuck around for long.

He did have a sex drive, but it was on the low side.

If he was busy with work, he could easily go a week or two without talking to his girlfriends. By the time he wrapped everything up, they had disappeared. This tendency had only gotten worse recently as he'd been spending all his free time and some work time going to Individu. He didn't have the time to think about anything else.

"That's pretty much the same thing," his father laughed.

"If you only came over here to torture me, you can just go back to your desk. I don't have time to goof around."

"Don't be like that. I have a reason for talking to you. Yanaginuma-san called. He wants to talk about the project."

"Oh?"

Ashizawa stopped typing and looked up. His heart started pounding restlessly.

"He said it's not urgent, but he offered to discuss it over dinner at the Grand Royale."

The current project was this plan to start a new restaurant. A chill shot down Ashizawa's spine momentarily, but then he changed his mind.

"At the Grand Royale?" His voice wavered. "It'll be free, right? If I can drink Petrus without upsetting anyone, I definitely want to go."

"You prefer your wine over your women, huh?" His father smacked his head lightly with some files he was carrying. "Don't they feed you enough at all those restaurants you work for?"

"It's two entirely different things, Dad. You know how much I like the wild game at Yanaginuma-san's. The *lièvre* is magnificent."

That was wild rabbit, but Yanaginuma also served deer, wild duck, and quail.

Wild game had firmer meat and a unique flavor that was completely unlike domestic animals. Some people couldn't eat it because they said the smell bothered them, but Ashizawa had been eating it since he was little, so he didn't mind it.

He had been going to the Grand Royale since he was in elementary school, before he could really appreciate the quality. It was at the top of the elite French restaurants, the so-called *grande maisons*, so naturally it was delicious.

The owner and head chef, Shozo Yanaginuma, was turning sixty this year. He was one of the reigning masters of French cuisine and an exceptional chef.

His main restaurant had branches in Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya. He also had a more casual restaurant in Shibuya called the Cafe Royale and, in the interest of bringing the taste of his restaurant into people's homes, he had a delicatessen chain called the Petit Royale in major stores across the country.

Currently Yanaginuma had stepped back from the front lines and was devoting all his energy to the expansion of his restaurants. He had been friends with Ashizawa's father for a long time, who in turn gave Yanaginuma advice about the business side of things.

"He suggested eight o'clock. I have to see a client, so I'll meet you there."

"Okay. I'll check my schedule, then call the restaurant."

"All right. See you later, then."

His father went back to his own desk, looking busy.

Ashizawa's father had always been busy when Ashizawa was little, too. But he was a man who cared deeply about his family and usually made up for the time he missed. No matter how busy he was, he always took one long vacation a year so that he, Ashizawa, and Ashizawa's mother and younger brother could take a trip together as a family. So Ashizawa didn't resent his father and still looked up to him.

After joining the same company, Ashizawa had reaffirmed his father's greatness and strove each day to match and surpass him.

Now that he had several successful restaurant chains of his own, he saw the success of the Grand Royale very differently. It wasn't just a question of focusing on short-term profits. The restaurant's development was based on long-term goals and cultural awareness.

Ashizawa felt a little jealous.

He wanted to try a job like that sometime. He knew that if he said anything about it, though, his father would

snort at what a rookie he still was after three years.

But that was Ashizawa's secret dream, almost an ambition.

Suddenly, Chef Tsubaki crossed his mind. He remembered how he had laughed at Ashizawa's offer, his expression when Ashizawa had tried to explain—and at the same time, Ashizawa imagined again that delicious food on his tongue.

Ashizawa's depression turned into excitement. Steeling his resolve, he wrapped up the last of his work.

People's criteria for what makes a *grande maison* vary. But in general, defining it as a high-end French restaurant is correct.

This classification is not limited to the price. It includes the quality of the food, the decor of the restaurant, the atmosphere, the tableware, even the staff and the quality of the customers. It is in this extraordinary environment that the *grande maison* can offer high-class satisfaction and luxury, and even elegance.

By that definition, Yanaginuma's Grand Royale was a *grande maison*.

"Good evening, sir."

It began with how the customer was greeted at the entrance.

A reserved man dressed in formal black greeted Ashizawa. He took his coat with casual ease as he shrugged it off.

"Ashizawa-san. We've been expecting you. Allow me to show you to your table."

"Are my father and Chef Yanaginuma here?"

"They have already begun their meals, sir."

Ashizawa checked the time and saw that it was already 8:30. He'd left himself enough time to get there on schedule, but right before he left work, a client trapped him in a conversation and he couldn't get away.

He knew his father would chew him out when he got to the table.

He suppressed his weary resignation and headed inside.

The restaurant was on the first floor of a hotel, which gave it an appearance of reserved luxury. A thick navy blue carpet with Baccara lights spread out at Ashizawa's feet, softly illuminating the path. The walls were the same color as the carpet, and were studded here and there with glass cases that showcased highly-polished pieces of silverware.

Ashizawa's heart leapt at the sight of the grand piano they passed on their way into the dining room. A sparkling chandelier hung from the high ceiling.

The tables were covered with pure white tablecloths and decorated with candlesticks and flowers that lusciously complemented the food and tableware. Ashizawa could feel his mood improving greatly.

"There you are!" his father called, noticing Ashizawa coming across the restaurant and raising his champagne glass. A man in the prime of his life, who well deserved the description of silver-haired gentleman, sat beside him placidly.

"It's good to see you again, Yanaginuma-san."

Ashizawa ignored his father and greeted Yanaginuma, the owner of this restaurant.

"I'm sorry for not keeping in touch myself. How have you been?"

"Very well, thank you."

Ashizawa sat down in the chair the *maitre d'* pulled out for him and bowed his head.

"It feels so strange to be eating in the main dining room."

"We had a customer call with an urgent request for the private room. I don't usually like people to see me eating at my own restaurant, but there was no helping it," Yanaginuma said with a rueful smile.

It was, in any case, the middle of the week, so there were very few customers even at the *grande maisons*. Aside from Ashizawa's table, there were only an older couple and a group of three men presumably having a business dinner.

"Did you order the Petrus?"

"Don't worry. We've even let it breathe. I plan to bring it out before the game course."

"I'm glad to hear it."

Though Chateau Petrus, a red Bordeaux wine, was different from the so-called "first growth" vintages, it had a similar body and flavor. But it was even more expensive.

Of course, Ashizawa didn't believe that the more a wine cost, the better it must be. He wouldn't dream of paying sixty or seventy thousand yen for a single bottle. But because he couldn't enjoy this wine by himself, he

wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to taste it.

His flute was quickly filled with champagne and the three men toasted.

The slightly bitter taste of the champagne was a good complement to the rich flavor of the appetizers, king crab and caviar *canapés*, and the *foie gras* that followed.

"But let's talk about business. The reason I asked you here today is to hear about our new restaurant." Yanaginuma changed the subject before the fish was brought out. "I'm not trying to rush you. I'd just like to know how things are going."

After the champagne, they ordered chardonnay. As he went through the familiar motions of the tasting, Yanaginuma's eyes were on Ashizawa.

"Your father tells me that you've been visiting many different restaurants lately. Have you found any good chefs?" Yanaginuma smiled serenely.

They had first talked about opening a new restaurant three months earlier. Yanaginuma was still passionate about cooking, though he had retired from the front lines and had thrown himself into the complex work of restaurant management. He would pop into his franchise restaurants when he had the time or, in discussion with a new chef, modify the taste of his deli menu to better reflect his vision.

For better or worse, Chef Yanaginuma and the Grand Royale were famous. If he wanted to try something new, his reputation would precede him and he wouldn't get honest feedback.

Yanaginuma often worried about saddling his



chefs with unnecessary baggage.

Because of that, he was planning to push forward the world of French cuisine once more without using his name by opening a new French restaurant where a young chef could do exactly what he wanted without needing to worry about money.

He had raised the idea of locating the new restaurant in a high-rise near the Shinagawa JR station, which had received a lot of attention as a new stop on the Shinkansen line. Originally he had thought about opening a Cafe Royale there, but considering the location and the available space, the place would mostly cater to young businessmen and women in their late twenties through early forties.

Yanaginuma seemed to consider it necessary to open a new kind of *grande maison* targeting this population.

The result was that he had approached Ashizawa.

The restaurant chain that Yanaginuma had built had targeted more or less the same group he was focusing on now, so much of the advertising work was already done. Yanaginuma and Ashizawa's father both thought that Ashizawa, who had practically been weaned on French cuisine, would be able to carry out the true vision behind this "new type of French restaurant."

Yanaginuma knew that there was a certain amount of risk involved; but he wanted to gamble on potential, youth, and the future. His eyes were as bright as a teenager's.

To be honest, the first time he'd been approached with the project, Ashizawa had considered it a burden.

He had wanted to get involved in the operation of a restaurant, the way his father was with Yanaginuma. But even though Yanaginuma's name wouldn't be on the restaurant, it would still be his.

Even if he was willing to accept that there were risks, Ashizawa wanted to take away some kind of benefit for himself, since he was doing the job. If the restaurant was in the red the first year, that was okay. But if business didn't pick up in the third and fourth years, Yanaginuma wouldn't be able to meet his goals.

This was business, and it was win or lose. Yanaginuma's friendship with Ashizawa's father was unusual.

Ashizawa was conflicted. If he failed, it would damage him as well.

But in the end, since Yanaginuma was a major player in the French restaurant world, every person on his staff wanted to repay his kind treatment of them and had decided to support his new venture.

The chef selected would have to know the basics of French cooking. He would need to understand the essence of the cuisine before making any innovative dishes.

Ashizawa had spent a month hammering out details of restaurant size and the time frame for the opening, and had only begun looking for a chef two months ago.

Of course he had considered the restaurants where he had eaten before, but also restaurants with good reputations, cramped bistros, and even culinary schools, searching for the right chef for Yanaginuma's plans.

But of all the restaurants that he considered good, none seemed quite right for entrustment with their plans. He didn't know what was wrong, but after beating the street fruitlessly, he'd discovered Individu.

"I may have found someone," Ashizawa answered without conviction, his eyes falling to the tablecloth.

"I've found the flavor I think would be perfect. No matter what dish I order, it's always amazing."

"Oh? Even better than mine?" Yanaginuma asked with a grin. Ashizawa bobbed his shoulders ambiguously. He would only put Yanaginuma in a bad mood if he answered honestly, but if he denied it, they would dismiss its quality.

"It's like comparing Japanese food with Western food: both are delicious, but too different to compare."

"Nice evasion." Yanaginuma nodded, looking satisfied.

"I don't know how to express how good the food is there. I just know that it's quite unlike anything I've ever eaten before. If I had to compare it to something, I'd say it reminds me of my mother's cooking."

"That's an interesting comparison," Ashizawa's father cut in. "Did your mother cook French food? Maybe you're not my son after all."

"We're trying to have a serious discussion here. Try to have some respect for that, please."

Ashizawa brushed aside his father's jocularly.

"My son's angry at me, Chef."

"Inevitable, I suppose. You brought it on yourself," Yanaginuma smiled. "But considering your enthusiastic remarks, Masaki, it sounds quite special."

"I agree with you, Yanaginuma-san. Ever since I first tasted this chef's cooking, I haven't been the same."

A waiter brought out a seafood *zabaglione* and set it in front of Ashizawa. Ashizawa let out a deep sigh.

"I don't know, it's almost like I've fallen in love."

"With the food? Or with the chef?"

"I'm not really sure."

Ashizawa gave a slight shake of his head.

"Have you talked to him?"

"Yes. Yesterday, actually."

Memories of the day before reawakened in his mind as if a spotlight had been flashed on them.

Tsubaki's eyes, staring at him. The things he'd said. Making Tsubaki angry. The wonderful food. The things Masatsuka had told him. All of it had happened in one day—no, in two hours after lunch—but the memories weighed like a lifetime on him.

"And?"

"I insulted him."

The silverware in Ashizawa's hands felt suddenly heavy and he put his hands down on the table.

"How did you do that?"

"I think I got too excited. I didn't make it clear why I had chosen his food. All I did was talk about the new restaurant."

Looking back on it now, it seemed perfectly natural that Tsubaki had gotten upset.

Ashizawa didn't report everything he remembered of the encounter, but the highlights were enough to make his father frown and Yanaginuma smile ruefully.

"I can understand why he was upset."

Yanaginuma had taken Tsubaki's side even though he wasn't there to be defended. "It's only at this point in my life that I've started taking it easy. When I was younger, I was quite hotheaded and devoted myself to my restaurant. If someone had offered me a project like this back then, I would have lost it."

Yanaginuma was smiling, but his voice was quite serious.

"You would have?"

"Of course. I regret it very much now, but I worked so hard it was like I didn't even have a family."

He spoke crisply and Ashizawa gulped.

Ashizawa didn't know much about Yanaginuma's family. His father had told him that Yanaginuma's first wife had died quite early on and that he had then married his current wife. He had one child, whom he apparently cherished, but Ashizawa had never heard more than that.

"If anyone had said anything at all to slight my beloved restaurant, it would have insulted me, too."

"I agree. I wasn't thinking." Ashizawa turned the conversation back to his failure and away from Yanaginuma's family.

"But essentially, you were so enchanted by his food that all you could think about was the future, is that it?"

"Yes, yes, that's it."

Ashizawa agreed emphatically with Yanaginuma's assessment.

It had been as if Ashizawa could see the future

right before his eyes. He could see it all so clearly: the restaurant they would build together, the concept driving it, and the food they would share with the world.

"So have you given up?"

"No!"

Ashizawa managed to answer without any hesitation.

"Even though he might very well not want to talk to you again?"

It was a cruel question. But Ashizawa wouldn't—couldn't—avoid facing reality. After leaving the restaurant the day before, he had thought about that possibility many times. Too many times to count.

Tsubaki had turned him down before he'd truly explained himself. He hadn't had the door slammed in his face, but Tsubaki had met with him expecting a very different conversation, so the result was the same.

It was naïve to think that Tsubaki would listen to him the next time Ashizawa went to see him.

He might not even be allowed to eat there anymore. That thought made him very, very sad.

Ashizawa wondered which of the two was worse: to not be able to eat there again, or to not be able to speak to Tsubaki again. Both made him sad. In any case, he wasn't thick-skinned enough to be able to keep paying visits, even with the threat of never being able to work together. His personality simply made it impossible.

If he could, he could; and if he couldn't, he couldn't. Until he decided which it was, he would never be released from the tension.

So he had to give it at least one more try.

"Last time, I talked to the chef as if it were a done deal. Next time I'll try attacking it head-on, and if that doesn't work either, I'll give up."

"All right." Yanaginuma nodded thoughtfully. "I'd like to taste this man's cuisine for myself if you're willing to go to so much trouble for him."

"You can't!"

"Why is that?"

"Because if by some chance he doesn't accept the offer, I won't be able to eat his food anymore, and I don't want anyone else to suffer that fate."

Yanaginuma's eyes widened in surprise.

"Ashizawa-san, your son is very fond of keeping secrets, isn't he?"

"So it would seem. I had no idea."

"What do you mean?"

Ashizawa tilted his head in curiosity, confused by their reactions.

"You basically told me to stay away from your toys just now."

"I did?"

"Of course. From what you've said, anyone would fall in love with this man's food as soon as they tasted it, and you don't want to share him with anyone until you've gotten him for yourself. That's what it sounded like to me."

Yanaginuma grinned at him, and Ashizawa thought back over what he'd said. As he slowly realized Yanaginuma was right, his cheeks burned.

"Please don't read too much into it. I meant only what I said."

"All right, all right. The conversation is going to get all twisted around if we argue about it," Ashizawa's father cut in, sounding annoyed.

"Father!"

"I'm not sure how I feel about my oldest son chasing after a man, but there isn't much to be done about it, I suppose. Your brother Minoru will preserve the Ashizawa family line, so don't worry about it. You can follow your own path in life."

"Isn't it nice to have such an understanding father, Masaki?"

"I can't believe you would support this kind of teasing, Yanaginuma-san."

"If you pursue this person with this much enthusiasm, I'm sure he'll hear you out. And if he does, it's up to you. You'll win this man over."

"Yanaginuma-san—"

Ashizawa had won over everyone he'd ever dealt with. If he could only convey his passion and his true feelings, he could get anyone to cooperate with him. His years of experience up till now should've helped him understand that.

"Anyway, do what you can. I have plenty of time, so I can afford to be patient."

"Thank you, sir. That's very kind."

Looking at his father and Yanaginuma, conviction welled up in Ashizawa. But for the moment, it only made him hungrier.

"Excellent! With that squared away, I feel like I could finish an entire bottle of Petrus by myself! Let's start the main course."

"Now, now. No need to get quite that excited," Yanaginuma said with a smirk. Ashizawa and his father both laughed.

Ashizawa wondered if he and Tsubaki would have as long a partnership as his father had had with Yanaginuma.

He knew nothing about the man. But even so, he knew his food. And he knew the inescapable hold that food had on his spirit.

Ashizawa wanted to know more about him. He wanted to tell Tsubaki about himself.

It still wasn't too late to talk to him about the restaurant.

What was the best way for them to get to know each other? As he enjoyed the exquisite evaporation of the wine's flavor on his tongue, Ashizawa's thoughts were with Tsubaki.

Chapter Three

The next afternoon, abandoning his unfinished work, Ashizawa made it all the way to Kunitachi station with the force of his resolve, but what came next wasn't so easy.

Walking out the southern exit of the station, he strolled around the neighborhood for several minutes. Despite the fact that the restaurant was visible from just outside the station, he couldn't go there yet.

After dinner the night before, he was sure he'd reaffirmed his decision; but now that he was actually here, a terrible anxiety oppressed him.

What would he say when he saw Tsubaki? How would he start? It was all planned out in his mind. He'd chosen an ordinary, domestically-made suit. But the mere thought of being unable to see Tsubaki ever again inevitably withered him.

Ashizawa internally pumped himself up and stopped in front of Individu. A "Closed" sign was already hanging on the door. Ashizawa realized that it was after three. But he'd gotten to the station at 2:30!

"What are they doing?"

He was on the verge of crying like a little girl as he peered through the wood-framed windows into the restaurant. A shiver ran through his body then.

He saw Masatsuka, but he wasn't alone: Tsubaki

was with him. He'd taken off his *tablier* and unbuttoned his chef's coat, and was sitting at a table laughing. Today he was wearing glasses.

The thin frame of his glasses made his face look even more angular.

"He's so handsome."

As he gazed intently at Tsubaki's face, Ashizawa was struck by this realization.

He wasn't classically handsome, but the more Ashizawa looked at him, the more he recognized Tsubaki's unique appeal.

Tsubaki was holding a coffee cup and chatting with Masatsuka. There was something bashful about his smile that looked good on him. When they'd first met, he'd smiled at Ashizawa, too. He'd given a magnificent belly laugh.

Ashizawa wanted Tsubaki to smile at him again. So he couldn't let his fear get the better of him now.

Finally, Ashizawa moved back to the door and pushed it open resolutely. The bell on the door jingled.

"I'm sorry, we're not open."

Masatsuka was the one who answered the new arrival. Seeing Ashizawa come through the door, his face was momentarily surprised.

"Who is it?"

Tsubaki got up from his seat inside the restaurant to see what was going on.

Ashizawa fought back his desire to flee and met Tsubaki's eyes, then immediately bowed.

"I'm sorry about what happened the other day."

"I'll be in the kitchen, Masatsuka."

Tsubaki spun on his heel in annoyance, but Ashizawa called after him, "Please hear me out! I deeply regret what happened the other day. I got ahead of myself and was very rude to you. I apologize for that from the bottom of my heart."

He took a quick breath and pushed on.

"But I'm in love with your cooking. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to work with you. I came to that realization after visiting your restaurant so often this past month."

Ashizawa's hand shook very slightly as he held his briefcase. He was so nervous. He tried with all his might not to let the trembling spread to the rest of his body.

"And?"

But even his most earnest entreaty was met with Tsubaki's disdain. He had been prepared for this and he bore it. Ashizawa balled his fists up at his sides and looked Tsubaki in the face.

"Your dedication is obvious in every part of this restaurant. It shows in the ambiance, in the food, the tableware, your ingredients, and your staff. The truth of what you said the other day is also visible."

The phone rang, cutting Ashizawa off.

"I'll get that."

"No, Chef, allow me. I'll go take the call." Masatsuka walked to the room next to the kitchen, which must have been the office.

Left alone together, Tsubaki looked eager to escape. He put a hand to his head, as if to hide the tension in his face, and sighed.

"So what did you want to say?"

He wasn't going to listen to anything else. His question was as sharp as a knife.

"Didn't I already tell you I'm not interested?"

"But we didn't really have a chance to discuss my offer."

"It wouldn't matter if we had."

Tsubaki swept his hair out of his face and turned to one side dismissively.

"Why not?!"

"What does it matter? I'm happy with what I have."

"That's a lie," Ashizawa was quick to counter.

"How do you know?"

"I've talked to many restaurant owners and worked with some of them. People who run a franchise of restaurants view their establishments differently and want different things out of them than they do in individually owned restaurants, but I believe that at heart the same impulses flow through you all."

"And what impulses might those be?"

Tsubaki glanced at Ashizawa out of the corner of his eye.

"The drive to make your food as good as you can and get as many people to enjoy your food as possible."

Tsubaki raised his eyebrows slightly and looked at Ashizawa suspiciously. But still, deep down, Ashizawa saw a light in them. He'd guessed right. Emboldened, he went on.

"As I said before, I think your restaurant is incredible. I don't think a chef like you will be satisfied here."

Ashizawa's heart was pounding. This was half a gamble, half a bluff.

He had acquired his negotiating skills from his time in America and three years in Japan. He knew you didn't win by fighting fair. You had to touch your opponent's heart, had to recognize what they wanted; then get ahead of them to guide everything to a skillful resolution.

It wasn't twisting words: it was making the truth mesh more smoothly with the truth.

"After your success here, you want to do something bigger. Am I wrong?" Ashizawa asked quietly, searching Tsubaki's heart.

He didn't break eye contact. He stayed intently focused on the spark of fire that wavered deep inside Tsubaki's eyes. And Tsubaki stared piercingly back at him. At first glance he looked peaceful, but Ashizawa sensed that he concealed a power that threatened to explode at any moment.

The air between them was tense. Ashizawa grew anxious.

"What I spoke to you about the other day is a very good deal. I didn't explain myself adequately, which led to our misunderstanding, but I believe that you and you alone are suited to this project, Chef Tsubaki. I don't want to pretend as if what is here in front of me doesn't exist. It's because it does exist that I want to talk to you."

Ashizawa chose his words with meticulous care. Tsubaki had to hear him out. Even if, at the end of it all, he refused, Ashizawa wanted Tsubaki to

understand why he was making the offer. He didn't want to let the misunderstanding rest.

"None of the details have been finalized yet. They would all be decided by you and I in consultation, Tsubaki-san. Of course you would retain ownership of your current restaurant. I need to discuss how that would happen with you, and I'm sure there would be some staffing issues. But we can continue talking until an agreement is reached. Of course nothing that you didn't approve of would—"

"Why are you explaining all this to me?"

Tsubaki was frowning deeply but a trace—just the tiniest trace—of severity had eased from his face. Did that mean that he wouldn't reject Ashizawa out of hand anymore?

"Because I earnestly believe that we can work together."

Ashizawa volunteered this opinion and an almost mocking smile curled Tsubaki's lips. Before Ashizawa could wonder about its meaning, Tsubaki explained it for him.

"How do you expect me to believe that? You know nothing about me."

He spoke as if he were holding back laughter, and Ashizawa thought he heard an unspoken "but" in Tsubaki's voice. "Well —"

"I don't know what sort of man you think I am, but I don't want to discuss my dreams with you. I don't operate on the kind of scale you're talking about. All I want is to keep my restaurant. I have quite a limited imagination."

Despite his rough posturing, Ashizawa knew Tsubaki was just putting on an act to try and fool him. He saw right through it.

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe me or not. That's how I am. Also—"

Tsubaki paused. Ashizawa was wondering what he was going to do next when Tsubaki strode up to him and grabbed his arms. He yanked Ashizawa towards him.

Ashizawa's eyes widened, but all he saw were eyes boring into his own. Tsubaki frowned in annoyance and tore his glasses off roughly. Then, just as Ashizawa saw him bringing his face closer, he felt something warm cover his half-opened lips.

There was no time to cry out. Tsubaki's tongue invaded his mouth, tracing over his soft palate. It was such a vivid feeling. Shocked, Ashizawa tried to get away, but Tsubaki was holding him with considerable strength.

He flailed his hands, willing to fight to the death, but the only effect it had was that Tsubaki circled an arm around Ashizawa's waist and pulled his body close against him.

Ashizawa stared up at Tsubaki, powerless.

He didn't know what was going on. He shook his head from side to side, but Tsubaki's lips chased him. Tsubaki's tongue circled freely over the flesh inside Ashizawa's mouth, trying to capture his evasive tongue.

"Mmf!"

Saliva was building up in his mouth. He felt the warm sensation of it as it flowed from the corner of

their locked mouths, sending a shudder down his spine. And every time Tsubaki's tongue moved, he made a disgusting slobbering noise.

The sound tickled over Ashizawa's eardrums, sending a sympathetic ache through his body and down into his hips.

Ashizawa was more surprised by his body's reaction than anything else. How could this kiss, seized from him as a man pinned his arms and held his waist, excite him?

He tasted a faint flavor of coffee on Tsubaki's tongue as it thrust into his mouth. It was the same blend he had drunk the last time he was here, apparently the blend Tsubaki made and enjoyed for himself.

It was just like his food, made with meticulous care to be the best it could be.

Tsubaki slowly pulled his lips away and said, "Do you want to work with me, even though I'm gay?"

His forehead was wrinkled and a fire blazed deep in his eyes as he stared at Ashizawa.

"In fact, I'm sleeping with everyone on my staff. Would you really make a guy like me the head chef of your precious restaurant?"

Tsubaki held Ashizawa's chin in his fingers and tilted his face up, looming over him.

He was tall and there was a threat in his voice. If Ashizawa didn't know any better, he probably would have been terrified. He probably would've swallowed this performance whole and run away for no good reason.

But Ashizawa wasn't scared at all. He knew



Tsubaki was just putting on an act to chase him off.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I don't know if you're gay or not, and I don't know if you're involved with your staff or not. But that has no effect on how you do your job."

"You're not disgusted?"

"I might have hesitated if you wanted to use me as an outlet for your desires. But there's no reason for us to discuss your sexual proclivities. All I'm looking for is a business partner."

The man looked at him in surprise. Until now, Tsubaki had presented Ashizawa with no openings to take advantage of, but here was one.

"I'd like to work with you very much," Ashizawa said, pursuing this opportunity. "I can't think of any other chef I'd prefer. Will you consider my offer? That's all I ask."

He bowed deeply.

"You don't think bowing is going to change any—"

"Give up, Tsubaki. You lost."

Ashizawa heard an unfamiliar voice behind him and raised his head slightly to see who it was. A man had appeared from the kitchen, wearing the same chef's jacket as Tsubaki's. He was of medium height and build, and his hair was cut so short that it stood on end.

"Shibata—"

"I could hear you talking all the way in the kitchen. I heard enough. I don't know the details, but look how desperate he is. Don't you think you ought to at least hear him out?"

"Thank you."

Ashizawa thanked this unexpected savior from the bottom of his heart.

"I'm Masaki Ashizawa. If you don't mind my asking, you are...?"

"Shibata, the restaurant's sous-chef."

Ashizawa offered his hand and the man took it with a grin. He had a kind smile that made him feel more comfortable just from looking at it.

"That means you're the second in command, right?"

"We only have two cooks, so there isn't anyone else to boss around. It might be more accurate to call me the baker."

"Shibata!"

Tsubaki looked upset at what Shibata had said.

"Well, it's true, isn't it? I'm not looking for pity when I say that. I think the bread I make is pretty good. The customers all like it. Even you recognize that."

"Yes, that's true, but—"

Ashizawa listened to their conversation, thinking back vaguely to the bread he'd had during his meals.

"The bread you serve here—do you bake it in the restaurant?"

"Yes. Although to be completely accurate, I bake it in another building near here. It's good, isn't it?" Shibata said with a grin.

"Delicious, yes," Ashizawa assured him, smiling too.

"I like hard breads and soft breads. But I like thin whole-grain bread that's a little salty best."

Whether for lunch or dinner, there was always a basket filled with bread in the center of the table. It wasn't always the same variety. Sometimes it was bread with walnuts in it, classic French bread, or regular dinner rolls. But no matter what the type of bread, it was always delicious. It was easy to eat too much of it and have no room left for the meal.

"I thought there was an agreement with a famous bakery somewhere to ship the bread in, but I guess I was wrong."

"You bet you were," Shibata answered with a friendly smile. "So what is it that you wanted to talk to our chef about?"

"Don't bother with it."

"Don't say that! I work here too, and I have a right to know what sort of business deals people are approaching my boss with. Or is it something you don't want me to hear?"

"Of course not," Tsubaki grumbled.

Shibata may have been the sous-chef, but Tsubaki acted somehow reserved towards him. Judging from the way they spoke to each other, Shibata may have been a few years older than Tsubaki.

"In that case, would you tell me what it is?"

"Certainly. So—"

The two chefs seemed to have finished their conversation. Shibata encouraged Ashizawa to explain, and so he summarized his discussions with Tsubaki from two days previously and today.

He mentioned how someone else would own the new restaurant, but that Tsubaki would be completely

free to operate however he wanted to.

Ashizawa was also honest enough to point out that Tsubaki would still face some risk. A few years worth of deficit could be ignored, but if the project was determined to be unprofitable, then the venture would be stopped. In the case of his own restaurant, where the red ink would hit him directly, Tsubaki could decide when he wanted to call it quits. But with an owner, things would be different. Tsubaki wouldn't be taking on any direct financial risk, so he wouldn't have any final authority, either.

"But if all goes well for the restaurant, you won't be fired for no good reason."

Considering that Tsubaki was being allowed to keep his own restaurant independent while the owners took on the majority of the risk for the new project, they were being quite generous when it came to the sharing of profits.

"The details are still vague, of course, but that's another advantage, because they can be ironed out in consultation with the chef."

Shibata crossed his arms in front of his chest and nodded thoughtfully.

"From what I've heard so far, it doesn't sound like a bad deal."

"Thank you."

"Shibata—"

Tsubaki slumped, letting his forehead fall onto Shibata's shoulder at the man's impulsiveness. He let out a deep sigh. "Please try not to be so rash about something this important. I'm not questioning whether

it's a good deal or not. But we don't know anything about this person and he doesn't know anything about us. How can we take his offer seriously?"

"Do you think I'm lying?" Ashizawa answered quickly. He couldn't let what Tsubaki had just said slide.

"How should I know?"

"Then I'll get someone else to vouch for me. Let me call my office—"

"That wouldn't prove much if the person you call is in on it."

"Why would I want to trick you?"

"What do you expect me to think? You haven't told me where the restaurant will be or who the owner is yet. There are plenty of scams where no details are revealed, and then when money exchanges hands, the person disappears."

"You think I'm pulling a scam?"

"Tsubaki—you're going too far."

"You should be a little more cautious, Shibata. This guy's business card is all we have to prove who he is. You know how easy it would be to fake that."

"I'm insulted. I assure you, I work for A&6. If you don't believe me, just look the number up in the phone book or on the Internet, then call them. They'll tell you that I work there."

"Will they also tell me about this project you're offering me?"

"Well—"

Ashizawa fell silent.

A&6 was a legitimate company, but each project

tended to be drawn up individually with the clients. So until the plans began to take shape, they were kept secret. The only people who knew about Ashizawa's current project were Ashizawa himself, the client Yanaginuma, and Ashizawa's father.

If he called his father, he would be able to confirm that it was legitimate, but his pride wouldn't let him do that. He wanted to solve this problem on his own.

"If I understand correctly, the reason you suspect my offer is a scam is because you can't trust me—do I have that right?"

"That's part of it."

"And the reason you won't listen to my offer is because you think I don't know anything about the way you run your restaurant?"

"Yes."

"All right." Ashizawa squeezed his hands tight and stared straight into Tsubaki's face. "Then I'd like to start helping out here at the restaurant, so you can get to know me better and I can understand how you work."

"That's a little sudden, don't you think?"

Tsubaki probably hadn't been expecting that. He looked surprised.

"Obviously I have a job already, so I won't be able to help all day, but in light of the circumstances I can make some time. I won't ask to be paid, of course. Honestly, I may just get in the way, but I'll do my best. Please give me a chance to prove myself."

"That's outrageous. I thought you couldn't get any crazier after you made your offer the first time, but I guess I was wrong."

Tsubaki swept the hair from his face, looking exasperated.

"What happened the first time?" Shibata pursued, curiosity plain on his face, but Tsubaki just shook his head.

"Nothing."

Of course, Ashizawa knew what Tsubaki was referring to.

Would you be mine?

He hadn't expected to be able to talk to Tsubaki. He'd been starstruck at the sight of him and had put his foot in his mouth. His cheeks burned with embarrassment thinking about it even now.

But he wasn't the only one who'd acted outrageously. The man glaring at Ashizawa right now had kissed him. Tsubaki may only have intended to scare him off, but it took a very particular kind of person to think of a tactic like that.

But then, most people wouldn't have been excited by a kiss like that, either.

The memory of what his lips had felt made Ashizawa's body tremble slightly, but he ignored it.

"I understand that it seems strange. But this is important enough that I can overlook that. I'm sure you also have reservations about hiring someone you know nothing about. But as I said before, if you simply call my office, they'll tell you that I work there. Anyone would be happy to confirm it for you. I don't want to cause any problems. Please don't reject my offer without giving us a chance to know each other better."

Ashizawa was begging, but he didn't begrudge

it. He was proud of his job. His eyes were strong and unwavering in his decision.

"Please. I'll do it for a whole month, if you like."

Ashizawa bowed deeply.

One month would put him at the deadline for finding a chef for the restaurant. If Tsubaki refused the offer then, the plans would be at a dead end and Ashizawa would have to start over again from the beginning.

But it wouldn't do any good to think about failure before he'd even begun.

All Ashizawa could do was try his best.

He knew that Tsubaki respected that. He was clearly a reasonable man. Ashizawa awaited his answer, almost praying.

"Will your company mind?"

Ashizawa looked up cautiously at his response. "What do you mean?"

"You'd be working for me, right? You have to make sure it's okay with your company," Tsubaki said, his face turned sulkily away. Ashizawa wanted to laugh.

"I can't say for certain when I'll be available, but I know they'll be fine with it."

Or rather, it *had* to be all right with them.

"Have you decided to give him a chance, Tsubaki?" Shibata asked.

"He hasn't left me much choice, has he?"

Tsubaki sounded very unenthusiastic, but it was a yes.

"Thank you very much. I'll do my best to get to know the restaurant and the rest of the staff. And you, Chef."

"Just so you know, I'm only giving you a month."

"That will be plenty of time."

Ashizawa couldn't keep from grinning. Tsubaki had been on the verge of running him off, but now he had a foot in the door. He knew there was still a lot of work to do, but this was a beginning.

"I'm going to go back to the office and start making the necessary preparations. I'll be in touch again soon."

"Chef Tsubaki? One of the suppliers just called."

Masatsuka finally came back from the office where he'd taken the phone call. He sensed something strange in the air and inclined his head uncomfortably.

"Did something happen?"

"Will you fill Masatsuka in? Let's get back to work, Shibata."

"All right. Good luck—Ashizawa, was it?"

"I really appreciate all your help today." Ashizawa bowed, his gratitude clear in his voice.

Shibata waved his hand dismissively and went back into the kitchen.

"So what's going on?"

Masatsuka, the only one who wasn't up to date, tilted his head slightly. Shibata and Masatsuka had both been extremely kind to Ashizawa, who could easily have been seen as a threat to them. If Tsubaki had people like this supporting him, he couldn't be all bad.

Ashizawa explained that he'd gotten a foothold in negotiations by promising to help out at the restaurant for the next month. Without any further explanation,

Masatsuka began to brief him on his duties and working hours.

"So you're willing to help on the floor? In that case, you'll need a uniform. Takagi's clothes might fit you." Masatsuka sized Ashizawa up with a quick glance and jotted down some notes.

"Who's Takagi-san?"

"He's the other waiter I told you about, who only works the dinner shift. He has another job during the day. Any other questions?" he asked, with a smile that held a bit of mean-spirited teasing.

"Tsubaki-san told me that he was gay and was sleeping with everyone on the staff. Is that true?"

Ashizawa knew it couldn't possibly be true, but it was a tiny revenge. Masatsuka listened to him in silence for a moment, then his cheeks slowly reddened and his smile became strained. "Where did you hear a thing like that?"

"Tsubaki-san told me himself a few minutes ago."

"I'll need to get back to you on that. That's enough for today, though. When you know when you'll be coming back, give us a call. Here's our business card."

"Thank you for everything."

Ashizawa gave a quick bow and left the restaurant. The second the door was closed, he heard Masatsuka shout, "How could you tell him that, Chef Tsubaki?!" He glanced back at the restaurant and stuck his tongue out.

The sun was setting and the sky was red. By the time he got to the station, his gloomy feelings had lifted.

"All I can do is give it my best shot."

Ashizawa may have stepped out of line, but he wanted to work with Tsubaki.

And maybe Tsubaki was right that it was a little strange to want that so badly without really knowing anything about the man. But Ashizawa trusted his instincts. He knew he had to have Tsubaki.

Ashizawa's confidence was ironclad.

Chapter Four

"You tie the *tablier* around your waist like this. The knot goes in front. It's easy to catch on things if it's too loose, so be careful. Everything looks like the right size for you. Can you walk?"

Ashizawa took a few experimental steps as Masatsuka talked. It was hard to take more than the tiniest steps, but that was probably normal.

"It's like wearing a skirt."

"I suppose it does feel similar." Masatsuka smiled. "Anyway, that's how you dress. Now to explain operations on the floor. You've come to the restaurant so often yourself, I'm sure you already know some of it. We number the tables starting from the kitchen, so table seven is by the door. Usually we only take parties up to four. For any more than that, we push two big tables together. If there's not enough room, come tell me."

After running a vacuum cleaner and mopping the floor, Masatsuka set a white tablecloth and a light blue cloth on each table.

"Next is the table settings. The big tables are easier to explain, so we'll start there."

"All right."

Ashizawa stood in front of the table next to Masatsuka and did what he did, hanging the white tablecloth on the back of a chair, then spreading out the blue cloth.

"We put it on at an angle."

Ashizawa arranged it the way Masatsuka told him to, smoothing out all the wrinkles. Next he spread out the white tablecloth, laying it on top of the blue cloth at a different angle.

When he set down the plates and glasses, small wrinkles rolled up in the cloth.

"You need to smooth the cloth back out when that happens."

Ashizawa had never paid much attention to the tablecloth before, but now that he saw how much technique went into their arrangement, he was impressed.

"Now try it again on the next table."

Masatsuka checked Ashizawa's work as he efficiently spread out the next tablecloth.

"Good. That's very good. Are you sure your company is all right with you doing this?" Masatsuka asked quietly, despite all the work they'd already done.

"We're pretty much a group of freelancers, so as long as I don't inconvenience any of my other clients, there's no problem."

Ashizawa answered with a laugh, but there had actually been a lot of resistance.

As he'd explained to Masatsuka, all of A&G's employees were individually contracted with their clients. It wasn't a job that kept them at their desks all day.

The only job he was working on right now was this French restaurant project. Everything else was long-term advising.

But those ongoing jobs were important, too, and there was no telling when a new request would come in. Ashizawa handled not only expansions into new locations and new sectors, but also closures, bankruptcies, and many other business concerns.

That made it impossible to leave work for a month. When he'd talked to his father about it, his father had asked if it was absolutely necessary to do this. What would Ashizawa really be able to do after only a month of helping out?

"I don't know myself what I'll be able to do. But I have to do something. I want to earn his trust."

He didn't know where this impulse came from, but he'd promised to do it so he wanted to see it through. Even if the project ended up going nowhere, Ashizawa wanted to earn Tsubaki's trust and find out more about him. These desires were powerful.

Ashizawa's father sensed his son's sincerity and said nothing more. In fact, he offered to help him manage his other projects.

Before, Ashizawa had taken on too much work. He now gave new employees the work that didn't really require him specifically and the jobs that required only periodic updates. For the jobs that required constant contact and the ones that seemed likely to request new projects, he sent out a message saying that he would be mostly out of contact for the next month and that he would only be checking his email and accepting phone calls in the morning hours.

Ashizawa only had Wednesdays and Thursdays off, because the restaurant was closed on those days.

All other days of the week, he would be helping out at Individu from four o'clock in the afternoon, one hour before dinner started, until the restaurant closed after eleven p.m. He'd contacted Masatsuka to discuss it the night before.

He went to work early that day, deciding to dress casually in loose-fitting jeans and a sweater.

He called out a cheerful greeting when he came in, but Masatsuka was the only one in the restaurant. The two chefs had gone out shopping and to take a break.

Ashizawa felt both relieved and disappointed by this news.

"You'll be working five days a week, eight hours a day, which is more than Takagi."

Masatsuka, who was checking his work with the tablecloths, was concerned about Ashizawa's fortune.

"It'll only be for a month, so it's no problem."

"You look a little frail for this work."

He took Ashizawa in with a quick glance from head to foot.

"I'm the kind of person who can't bulk up no matter how much I exercise."

"I see."

"You're pretty slim, Masatsuka-san."

"I'm sturdy, though."

Their eyes met with a smirk. Ashizawa had the feeling that he would get along with Masatsuka.

When they'd finished the big square tables, they moved on to the small round ones. These cloths were smaller and it was hard to find their center.

"This comes with practice. Find the center with

the fold lines and put it in the middle of the table, then spread the rest out. Hold down the center and smooth out all the wrinkles, then put the second tablecloth down on top of it and do the same thing. Hold the center down with a finger so you don't lose it." Masatsuka covered the table expertly as he talked.

"That's amazing."

"That was a real pro's technique."

"Don't let that impress you. Go try it over there. You don't have to get it right on the first try. And take your time to do it right. I'm going to get the flowers ready."

"You're not going to watch?"

"I can't hold your hand forever. Tomorrow, you're going to have to do all the tablecloths by yourself. So pay attention."

Masatsuka gave him a smile and then left.

"I guess he's not a total pushover."

With his qualification as a *sommelier* and his perfect, refined service, Masatsuka could have held his own beside the best *maitre d's* of the *grande maisons*. Individu wasn't a big restaurant, but it was plenty of work for only two waiters to take care of. But Ashizawa had never been disappointed by the service here. That showed how in tune they were with the customers' needs.

It wasn't just casual service. They always chatted with Ashizawa when he was a customer.

Their rhythm when bringing out the food was excellent, as well. There was perfect communication between the floor staff and the kitchen: that contributed

to their success. Even if Ashizawa didn't reach the same level after a month, he would still have some rapport established with them.

Ashizawa set the center of the cloth on the table and spread it open just like he'd been taught. But when he smoothed the wrinkles out, the center kept slipping out of place.

When he pulled to the right, the left was off, and when he pulled to the left the right was off. He finally got the blue cloth in place, but couldn't get the white cloth to lay well on top of it.

Ashizawa pulled both cloths off the table and tried again.

"Hey, how's it going?"

The bell over the door jingled and Ashizawa heard a cheerful voice call out in greeting. He paused in his work and turned to see who had spoken. A young man in baggy cargo pants and a big shirt stood grinning at him. It was the waiter he had seen several times when he'd come here for dinner.

"Hello. I'm Masaki Ashizawa. I'll be helping out here for the next month." Ashizawa bowed, still holding the tablecloth.

"Oh, so you're Ashizawa-san! I see."

The man shoved both his hands into his pockets and scrutinized Ashizawa.

His eyes were large and limpid and he was an inch or two shorter than Ashizawa. The magnificence of his features stood out even more now that he was wearing such rundown clothes than it did when he was in uniform. His soft hair fell almost to his shoulders and

that, combined with the odd meekness of his expression, made him look somehow girlish.

"I'm Takagi. Yoshihiro Takagi. I'm studying ceramic art at school and I work here four nights a week."

"Ceramics?"

"Yup. I want to be a sculptor. Actually, the restaurant uses my plates a lot."

Ashizawa was a little surprised by how frankly he spoke. But Takagi didn't seem to notice and picked up one of the plates to show him.

"That's one of the dessert plates."

"Right. It's not very good, but Tsubaki-san said it had flavor, so he uses it. I think I'm more embarrassed than flattered, though. And what're you doing, Ashizawa-san? Where's Masatsuka-san? And the chefs, for that matter?"

He put his hands back in his pockets and looked around the restaurant.

"Masatsuka-san went to get the vases and the chefs are out shopping."

"So you're practicing spreading out the tablecloths all by yourself?" Takagi looked down at the tablecloth in his hand. "The round tables are really hard, huh?"

Had he seen Ashizawa struggling?

"I couldn't get it right at first either. Masatsuka-san always had to fix it for me. But once you get the hang of it, it's really easy. I'll show you."

He took one hand out of his pocket and held it out to Ashizawa, who handed the tablecloth over to him.

"If you don't know exactly where the center is,

you can sort of guess. You can just use your hands—you don't need to grab a ruler or anything."

Takagi spread his hand wide and used his thumb and pinkie to find the approximate center of the table.

"We've got the diameter, so the center is here. So we use the folds in the cloth to put the center there, then hold down the middle part really hard and spread it out with the other hand. And presto."

He smoothed the wrinkles out and spread the cloth beautifully.

"Then you eyeball it. If it's on at an angle, that's great. You just match up the centers and you're done. If you're nervous, it makes wrinkles, so you have to just go for it. And then you're done."

His method was different from Masatsuka's, but he smoothed out all the wrinkles perfectly.

"Easy, huh?"

"Y—yes, it really is."

"Okay then, your turn!"

"Uh—"

Takagi swept his beautiful work off the table. He must have inherited Masatsuka's boot camp style of instruction.

"Practice is the mother of perfect! Good luck."

"What is that supposed to mean? You're mixing up your proverbs. I wish you'd just learn them. It's 'practice makes perfect.'"

Masatsuka came in carrying a silver tray loaded with single-stem vases, glaring at Takagi.

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does. And do you know what time it is?"

"Four...fifteen?"

"There's only forty-five minutes before we open for dinner. Hurry up and get dressed."

"Yes, sir!"

Unaffected by Masatsuka's anger, Takagi grinned and disappeared into the back room.

"That's Yoshihiro Takagi, the other waiter. You've seen him before, haven't you?"

"He looks like a girl at first glance."

"Maybe if he didn't talk so much." Masatsuka frowned. "Next I need you to put these vases, the salt and pepper shakers, the candles, and ashtrays on the tables."

This was the advantage of coming to the restaurant so often. Ashizawa knew exactly where to put everything without needing to be told.

He arranged the silverware and set out the plates. When they had finished folding the napkins, Tsubaki returned.

"Welcome back. We're almost done setting up out here."

"Thanks. Where's Yoshihiro?"

Tsubaki stood in front of Masatsuka wearing a black leather jacket over his uniform.

"He just got here."

"Late again, huh?"

A slight smile appeared on Tsubaki's face. With the smile still on his lips, he glanced over at Ashizawa. Without missing a beat, Ashizawa bowed.

"I look forward to working with you over the next month."

"...Yeah."

Tsubaki's smile disappeared and he turned back to Masatsuka.

"Any changes in the reservation list for tonight?"

"There haven't been any calls so far. A group of four will be coming at seven and two others at eight. Apparently they're all women."

"As for the menu..."

Tsubaki and Masatsuka seemed to have forgotten all about Ashizawa. Ashizawa knew it was inevitable, but he felt alienated and jealous of Masatsuka.

He wondered if he would actually be able to storm this castle in only one month.

"Oh, Ashizawa."

His head had begun to droop when he felt a clap on his shoulder.

"S—Shibata-san."

He turned around and saw Shibata standing behind him, wearing a light shirt over his uniform like Tsubaki.

"Do you start today? Good to have you."

"Thank you. I look forward to it. Can I help you bring anything in?"

The delicious smell of freshly baked bread wafted from the bag Shibata carried.

"You can have one if you want. I just baked them, so they're still warm."

"Really?" Ashizawa looked at Tsubaki, but Shibata laughed.

"The bread is my domain, so don't worry about what that old downer says!"

"Are you calling me a downer?"



"Maybe!"

Shibata seemed unconcerned by Tsubaki's intense stare and held the bag open for Ashizawa.

"Go ahead, try one. There's a couple different types."

"Ooh!"

There were small rolls, walnut bread, classic baguettes, and many other varieties. They all looked so good that Ashizawa couldn't choose.

"I want one!"

A hand reached past Ashizawa and grabbed a dinner roll.

"Hey, Yoshihiro!"

"Awesome! I skipped lunch today. Thanks, Shibata-san."

Takagi had finished changing. He stuffed the bread into his mouth as he buttoned up his collar.

"Oo shoo' try un! 'ey're 'ood!"

"Um, all right."

"Don't talk with your mouth full. This place is a zoo."

Shibata shrugged.

"I think it's nice having someone so cheerful around. I'm going to have this one."

Ashizawa selected one of the walnut breads. It was still spongy and warm, and when he brought it to his lips, he smelled the delicious aroma of walnuts.

He stared at the bread and gasped. "Oh wow!"

"How is it?"

"I always thought your bread was good, but it's absolutely amazing when it's fresh like this."

"Thanks."

Ashizawa's praise brought a bright smile to Shibata's face. Ashizawa felt eyes on him and when he turned to look, Tsubaki was looking at him placidly, watching the two of them.

"Oh—"

"Did you learn about how things work out here?"

"Y—yes. The basics."

"Leave the orders and wine selection to Masatsuka and Takagi for today and just focus on bringing out the food."

Ashizawa had wondered if he was being ignored, but then their eyes met. Tsubaki's encouragement warmed his heart.

"Yes, sir!" he answered eagerly. Tsubaki frowned slightly, then reached an angular, long-fingered hand out to Ashizawa. Ashizawa watched it approach. It swept over his cheek, wiping away the breadcrumbs around his mouth.

"Oh—"

"You're competing with Takagi to see who can be more childish, I see."

He smiled gently and Ashizawa's heart pounded wildly.

"Let's get to the kitchen, Shibata."

"Right. Good luck, Ashizawa. If you have trouble with anything, just ask someone. Don't be shy."

"A—all right. Thank you for the bread."

"If there's any left, you can take some when you go home." Shibata smiled and headed for the kitchen.

"And Takagi—you missed lunch? We have some

leftovers you can eat."

"Wow, thanks, Shibata-san!"

He followed Shibata to the kitchen like a dog following its master, tail wagging.

"And *that* was the illustrious staff of Individu. You've met them all now," Masatsuka concluded with a graceful bow.

Ashizawa pored over the menu and wine list until the restaurant opened.

For dinner, Individu had no fixed menu, only offering items a la carte. There were appetizers, salads, soups, fish, and meat. The customer could choose what they wanted based on their mood and appetite. Every plate was piled high with food, so some dishes could be prepared in half portions.

One result of coming to this restaurant so often was that Ashizawa had mostly memorized the dishes he'd ordered.

And though he was nowhere near as educated as a *sommelier*, he had some knowledge about the taste and vintages of wines. That was a result both of his work as a restaurant consultant and the fact that his father had taken him to Yanaginuma's restaurant all through his childhood.

Masatsuka then told him where the wine cellar and dish room were. Since it was a French restaurant, all the wine in the cellar would be French, but there were a great number of bottles and varieties.

"There must be three thousand bottles."

"Three thousand? Isn't that a lot for such a small restaurant like this?"



"I suppose so. I was surprised too when Chef Tsubaki told me to keep that many bottles, but why not? We use up more wine than most other restaurants."

Ashizawa had sensed that when he had come to the restaurant as a customer.

People usually ordered an appetizer and an entree, then cheese after the meal. At each stage of the meal, customers emptied entire bottles of wine at a quick pace. No doubt it was partly due to Masatsuka's competent advice leading to excellent wines. But even compared to the wine bar that Ashizawa worked with, Individu still came out far ahead in its wine consumption.

In the dish room, large plates and silver cutlery could just be tossed into the dishwasher. That took care of everything from washing to drying, so all they needed to do was to give the dishes a quick rinse in water.

They put the plates away when they came out dry, but polished the silver with a cloth before putting it in a drawer.

"That's useful."

"Yes. But we wash the glasses by hand. And always rinse them with water to finish."

"Hot water or cold water?"

"Hot water clouds the glass. You dry each one carefully, then put them on this shelf. Depending on how much piles up, the floor staff will wash some dishes during the shift. Otherwise, we normally wash everything up after we close."

As Masatsuka described the cleaning utensils and linen washing processes to him, the time drew nearer for opening.

"How much experience do you have in the restaurant industry?"

"It's not quite the same type of work, but I would say that my consulting might count."

Masatsuka smirked at Ashizawa's answer. "That may be. But I'll give you an overview of service in this restaurant. That is: smiles."

"Smiles—?"

"Our customers think the restaurant is delicious and fun, from the moment they step in the door until they go home. How do we manage that? It's not just the chef: the floor staff needs to stay aware of the customers' smiles. That's Tsubaki's guiding principle."

Ashizawa felt enlightened by Masatsuka's explanation.

Five o'clock rolled around. They hung the "Open" sign on the door and began playing light classical music. In that instant, Ashizawa felt himself straightening.

"My feet are killing me!"

It was almost midnight when Ashizawa got home from his first day of work. He fell backwards onto the sofa in the apartment where he lived alone, and stretched his exhausted legs. The restaurant wasn't big, but he had been moving the entire time they were open. He hoped his shoes would get more comfortable tomorrow.

The restaurant closed at eleven, but the customers and staff didn't pay much attention to that. The last

customer had come in just a few minutes before the kitchen closed and then ordered a full meal. Since Ashizawa had to go to work the next day, he had been allowed to leave at the promised hour of eleven o'clock, but he wondered how the rest of the staff were going to get home.

He received some of the fresh-baked bread as a present on his way home. It was still fluffy.

Normally the floor staff was given time to eat between store opening and six o'clock. That day, too, they'd had Shibata's bread, which went very well with the hashed beef sauce they were given.

"Maybe I'll take some to the office tomorrow and make Dad try it."

They were keeping it a secret exactly where Ashizawa was helping out, but no one would be able to figure out where he was working just from a piece of bread. And if his dad ate this bread, he wouldn't need to know where it came from for it to reassure him.

Ashizawa wasn't used to work like this, so he was worn out but satisfied. There had been many things he didn't know and he apologized many times to the customers. That made him feel useless, but it had been fun anyway.

As soon as the restaurant opened, Ashizawa had sensed Tsubaki's eyes on him and he'd felt driven to make a good impression. But as customers began to fill the tables, he no longer noticed it. Or rather, he didn't have time to think about it.

The people who patronized Individu were generally tolerant, as Ashizawa had been during his own

as a customer. They greeted the new staff member unanimously and kindly helped him without berating him for his mistakes, even when he was slow with their food. But that only made Ashizawa feel bad for abusing their kindness and he vowed not to make the same mistakes again.

Takagi had been as hyperactive as a child before the restaurant opened, but as soon as the doors opened he transformed into the quintessential waiter. His laid-back personality was still the same, of course, and he helped the first customers in the restaurant relax with a friendly smile. When they hesitated over the menu options, he provided impeccable advice. His service was so practiced that he no longer seemed like a graduate student. Ashizawa learned that he had worked in coffee shops and fast food restaurants since high school.

Masatsuka's service was a model in its perfection and fluidity, putting all the customers at ease. Seeing his work up close, Ashizawa could feel its effects. His movements as he served wine, especially, were like a sophisticated dance, elegant and refined.

Ashizawa thought there was something that separated Masatsuka from himself, and on his third day of work he realized what it was. Every one of Masatsuka's movements was strictly controlled, following the form. One movement flowed into the next without the slightest hesitation.

Perhaps his absolute confidence in his service made his movements look so beautiful. He even uncorked the wine masterfully. Ashizawa suspected that if he and Masatsuka were to serve the exact same wine,

Masatsuka's would taste better.

It was the same with the food.

Food served with a smile tasted better than food served indifferently. The basic taste remained the same, but a smile added a certain spice that let customers remember the experience as wonderful with more than their taste buds.

Ashizawa felt as if his work on the staff had allowed him to understand one part of why the food had been so delicious the first time he came, and why it only got better the more he'd returned.

The staff represented Tsubaki's principles loyally.

The restaurant created good customers and good customers made for a good restaurant.

Ashizawa wanted the customers who came to Individu to have better and better food each time. And in order to do that, he had to understand the food itself.

He rolled over and took the menu they'd given him out of his bag. He had to memorize the menu or he would stumble when bringing out the food and that would stress the customers.

"I'll ask Masatsuka about the parts I don't understand tomorrow."

Ashizawa lay on the sofa for a while gazing at the menu before a deep sleep swallowed him up.

"I'll do better tomorrow than I did today. And then...I know he'll..."

He finally drifted off, mumbling to himself.

Chapter Five

Ashizawa worked at the office until two, then wrapped up some odds and ends to make it to Kunitachi just after three. He strolled around to see what there was to see at the university and on the street that ran past it, and took a break at a famous old coffee shop until ten after four.

The restaurant was closed on Wednesdays and Thursdays, so it felt like a long time since he'd seen everyone.

"Hello."

"Hey there."

Ashizawa looked up at the person who'd greeted him and his eyes widened.

"Takagi, your hair—"

"Cute, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it's cute, but..."

Takagi's hair was bright blond and plaited into an abundance of little braids that brushed his shoulders.

"He's a punk, isn't he?"

Masatsuka came out of the back room after changing, his vest still unbuttoned. He tied the strings of his *tablier* as he let out a deep sigh.

"You're so mean, Masatsuka-san! Everyone at school liked it."

"You go to an art school."

"That's discrimination."

"No it's not, it's common sense. Have you ever seen a waiter look so bizarre?"

"I bet they look like this in France!"

"Well, this is Japan."

"Hey, do you think it's weird, Ashizawa-san?" Takagi asked him with a wide-eyed gaze.

"Well, it's not strange, *per se*..."

But Ashizawa saw where Masatsuka was coming from.

"Don't try and drag anyone else into this. We'll just wait and see what the chef says."

"He said I look cute."

"When was this?"

"This morning. I saw him when he was out restocking, and he said it looks cute."

"Fine. I give up."

Masatsuka's poker face crumbled in the face of Takagi's guileless answer. In that moment, Takagi was victorious.

It had been three weeks since Ashizawa had started working at Individu.

The first week he devoted so much energy to getting used to the restaurant, to the work, and to the people that he didn't really remember what he'd done. The second week he'd finally had time to take a look around and he'd known what needed to be done without

having to be told. He had gotten the hang of polishing wine glasses and understood the roles and relationships of the staff a bit better.

Tsubaki was the owner and head chef, the ruler at the top of the pyramid. The image of him as arrogant and stubborn that Ashizawa had formed at their first meeting had disappeared completely. Rather, he had a nuanced personality, exacting and methodical. That made him rigid, which may have made him seem stubborn.

During work hours, he stayed in the kitchen with Shibata and left the floor to Masatsuka, throwing himself into his cooking.

A counter connected the kitchen to the restaurant, where they set food once it was ready to serve. The floor staff communicated with the kitchen staff across this counter and Ashizawa found the dedication he glimpsed across this barrier captivating.

Ashizawa had never noticed it as a regular customer, but by having a menu full of choices they had to select their ingredients carefully so that it didn't matter what customers decided to order each day. If they didn't use an ingredient because no one ordered it, there was a high probability that it would go to waste. But Tsubaki had never once stopped using his *a la carte* menu in the two years since opening the restaurant.

Shibata worked in the kitchen, helping Tsubaki. His outgoing nature stood out, perhaps because he worked beside Tsubaki. He seemed to be two or three years older than Tsubaki—according to the staff, they were graduates of the same culinary academy. Knowing this, Ashizawa could understand why Tsubaki treated

him almost deferentially even though he was the owner of the restaurant.

Shibata was no slouch compared to Tsubaki and he prepared certain main dishes for the menu exclusively. He was especially talented with seafood. Two of the dishes Ashizawa had liked best as a customer, the butter-roasted tilefish and *alfonsino* with a side of *ratatouille*, were made by Shibata following Tsubaki's recipe.

Shibata made all the food for the staff, as well.

He made it from recipes, so it didn't shine like Tsubaki's creations, but it was still a pleasure to eat, full of his warmth. Ashizawa thought the quality was more than enough for Shibata to be able to open his own restaurant, but when he suggested it, Shibata had simply told him he wasn't ready yet. He was usually honest, but apparently the truth was that he had been approached many times about starting his own restaurant or by people trying to hire him away for their own restaurants, but he had refused them all.

Tsubaki recognized that Shibata far outshone him in baking bread.

When Ashizawa had taken the bread he'd received on the first day to the office everyone, not just his father, had praised it wildly.

It was still moist the next day and was delicious all by itself, but it also highlighted other foods. It was the bread best suited for Tsubaki's cooking.

On the floor, Masatsuka ruled. Despite the occasional rebellion, even Takagi obeyed his orders. When Takagi was there, mixing cocktails was his responsibility. He had worked at a bar when he was in

college, so he seemed to have memorized all the best-known recipes. The only problem was that the same drinks didn't always come out with the same taste.

But it was the combination of expertise that these four brought that made Individu what it was, not Tsubaki alone.

"What are you smiling about, Ashizawa-san?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Then you need to get changed. We have a reservation for eight at five this afternoon, so you need to eat before the restaurant opens if you can."

"All right. I'll be right back."

"Oh, but there's—"

Before Masatsuka could finish, Ashizawa opened the door to the back room.

"What is it?" he asked as he went inside. Then he noticed there was someone else there. He froze. "Oh . . ."

"You could have knocked."

Tsubaki turned to look at him, a little embarrassed. He was naked from the waist up.

"I—I'm sorry."

Ashizawa saw now what Masatsuka had been trying to warn him about.

"You don't have to leave." Tsubaki laughed as Ashizawa hurried to close the door. "You're going to be quick, right? Then we'll just change at the same time. Even if it is a little cramped in here."

"Uh—okay."

"Close the door."

"Right."

Ashizawa reached back to close the door, trapping

him alone with Tsubaki in the tiny room. He leaned back against the door and stood stock still for a long moment.

He had been working at this restaurant for the last few weeks in order to better understand Tsubaki and to help Tsubaki accept him. Or that was the plan. But in fact they had hardly talked at all and he hadn't paid much attention to Tsubaki.

Perhaps for that reason, being so close that he could reach out and touch Tsubaki now made him uncomfortable. He gently laid a hand over his wildly thumping heart and took deep, quiet breaths.

"What are you doing?" Tsubaki asked suddenly, sending a shot of adrenaline racing through Ashizawa's body.

"Nothing."

He looked up at Tsubaki, who was such a ridiculously brawny man for a chef. His form was abundantly clear even when he wore his chef's coat, but seeing his bare skin now drove it home.

He wasn't extremely muscular, but rather had beautifully balanced muscles over his large frame. Being a chef must have been much more demanding work than Ashizawa had thought. His biceps were especially magnificent.

"Why are you getting changed right now, Tsubaki-san?"

"I spilled some soup I was making on myself."

"What? A—are you all right? You didn't burn yourself?" Ashizawa asked quickly.

"I'm fine, but now I have to change. You need



to take the squash and cabbage soup off the menu for tonight."

"All right."

He pulled a clean chef's coat over the T-shirt he was wearing and carefully buttoned each of the buttons in turn. Ashizawa realized he was staring at Tsubaki's long fingers and turned quickly to his own locker and pulled out a shirt.

"How's work?"

He looked back and saw Tsubaki tying his *tablier* around his waist.

"I'm going to start taking orders and managing tables by myself tonight."

"You memorized the entire menu?" Tsubaki looked slightly surprised.

"That only took a week," Ashizawa answered somewhat defensively.

"That's impressive."

Tsubaki smiled. His eyes narrowed kindly and Ashizawa's heart pounded.

"I have a good memory when it comes to work."

"I see. But really, it was just easier because you've eaten here so often, right?"

"When a customer asks me, I can recommend the menu items I enjoyed with confidence."

"So that's why there have been so many orders for roast beef lately."

"What?" Ashizawa asked softly.

Just as Masatsuka had once advised him, when customers asked for recommendations before ordering, he told them about the roast beef.

"Wasn't it you who said that the tenderness of the beef combined with the crisp bread and scallion sauce was superb, and that even if you wanted to eat something else you couldn't?"

As Tsubaki spoke, Ashizawa's chest felt tighter and tighter. "Yes, that was me."

"The beef is good, but I'd like people to try other things too, so please recommend something else today."

"All right."

Tsubaki finished pulling the strings tight on his *tablier* and left the room.

Ashizawa waited for the door to close, then he crumpled to the floor.

"What am I going to do?"

He covered his burning cheeks with his hands. His heart was pounding so hard it felt like it might leap out of his chest. The only reason he was like this was because of Tsubaki.

"It wasn't fair of him to smile at me like that."

It was the same smile he gave the staff, and he had given it to Ashizawa. That meant that he considered Ashizawa a colleague, at least a little bit. That realization made Ashizawa happier than he thought it would.

But then that criticism.

For a second, Ashizawa hadn't understood what Tsubaki was talking about. But then he remembered.

It was the first time he'd come to the restaurant. He'd been so surprised at how good the food was that he had taken a week and three more visits to form a more clear-headed reaction. After that, he could recognize how good it was and he had asked Masatsuka to convey

his compliments to the chef.

Even now, he could still clearly remember the excitement he had felt then. How good the meal had been, how happy it had made him, the thrill of imagining the kind of person who could make food like this. He'd been dancing on air.

Ashizawa had first met Tsubaki a mere three weeks ago. The man who almost never came out onto the floor had come out to see him.

He'd remembered the compliments Ashizawa had given his food, which Masatsuka had reported to him—but how was Ashizawa supposed to know that he'd remembered them all?

Because Tsubaki had given him such an generous smile at first, his later coldness was all the worse because of the contrast.

But if Tsubaki hadn't refused him his warmth then, Ashizawa wouldn't be as happy as he was now to imagine his gentle smile again.

That stirred up complicated emotions.

"Is something wrong, Ashizawa-san?" Masatsuka called, knocking on the door.

Ashizawa realized he had been in the back room for more than ten minutes. What was he doing? He was supposed to be getting changed for the reservation at five.

"No, I'm fine. Sorry, I'll be right there."

He apologized and changed quickly, then went back to the floor. He ate even faster than he'd changed and helped set up the tables. He could already hear the sound of something frying in the kitchen and the rattle of

utensils. He caught a glimpse of Tsubaki's face in profile over the counter and remembered his naked body. His cheeks grew warm.

"Ashizawa-san?"

"Yes?"

This was no time to lose himself in his memories.

"The group coming today has already asked to be served half portions. I'll be watching the progress of the food and signal you when it's ready to be served, so you need to follow what I do."

"All right."

"They're also going to ask for drink recommendations to go with the food. I'll give the advice about that, so be sure to serve enough wine."

Masatsuka would take care of the party of eight and Takagi would handle any other customers that came in. But if things got busy, Masatsuka would need to work other tables, too.

There were two round tables and three square tables still available. It was a Friday and judging by last week and the week before that, they would have a full house.

"If there's a break in the reserved group, we'll put two groups of two at the round tables. In that case, you'll have to take their orders and manage the tables, Ashizawa-san."

"A—all right."

A vivid jolt of stress ran through Ashizawa.

"You just need to relax and greet people as usual. If you have a problem, just ask for me or Takagi."

As if on cue, the customers arrived the very

moment Masatsuka finished his explanation. "Hello!" It looked like a welcoming party for a woman new to their office.

"Good evening."

Takagi and Ashizawa helped take their coats and bags and then pulled their chairs out for them.

"The food here is really good. You're going to love it."

Ashizawa smiled at these knowing words despite himself. Individu was a restaurant he wanted to tell others about. But if it got too popular, it would always be too full to get reservations.

"Hello!"

As he thought this, more customers arrived. The restaurant came to life.

Ashizawa helped Masatsuka as directed with the large group, but the restaurant had filled by eight o'clock.

"I've got it under control now, so you can take care of the round tables like we talked about."

The group's entrees had been served and all that was left now was dessert.

"All right."

Masatsuka pointed vaguely back at the floor and Ashizawa went to the tables he had been assigned. It was a group of two women in their early thirties.

"Good evening, ladies. Would you like something to drink before your meal?"

The two women chatted as they looked over the menu and then decided to ask Ashizawa's advice. "What do you have?"

Ashizawa answered their hesitant question with a smile. "If you prefer champagne, we serve Bollinger and Veuve Cliquot by the glass. We also have *rosé*, or a mimosa, which is a cocktail made with champagne that many women enjoy."

"We'll try the mimosa."

"Very good."

Ashizawa collected the wine menu and moved to the back of the restaurant.

"What's the order?"

"Two mimosas."

"Coming right up," Takagi said with a grin.

They used fresh orange juice at Individu. While Takagi efficiently cut the skin off an orange, Ashizawa poured champagne into two flutes.

"These are really easy to make. You could probably make them yourself. Okay, there you go."

"Thank you."

He included a dish of pickled olives for the *hors d'oeuvres*.

Most people picture the things they get on pizza when they hear the word "olive," but pickled in vinegar, olives have a rich taste that goes well with champagne.

Ashizawa set everything on the table and asked, "Are you ready to order?" His heart leapt for a moment, but he brought a smooth smile onto his face.

"We'll have the Provence-style salmon *terraine*, the squash and cabbage soup, and the wild rabbit *pâté* tart with shrimp scampi sauce."

"Excellent choice."

He noted the order and passed it over the counter

into the kitchen. He watched them read it inside the kitchen and waited tensely.

"Provence-style terrine and—"

Tsubaki had picked up the order slip. But after reading it through, he fell silent.

"Did I write something sloppy?" Ashizawa asked in trepidation, speaking quietly so as not to be heard on the floor.

"What did they order?"

"Squash and cabbage soup."

"Did you not hear what I told you before?" Tsubaki whispered back, clearly upset.

"What did you tell me earlier?"

Ashizawa wondered what Tsubaki meant. He'd talked to Tsubaki in the back room. He'd been changing because he'd spilled the soup he was making and—Ashizawa gasped.

"I'm sorry. I forgot to tell them we didn't have the soup today."

He'd told Masatsuka and Takagi after he came back from changing, but the only reason he'd forgotten was that he was so nervous. And that wasn't an excuse.

"I'll go fix the order."

"How much is left from before, Shibata?"

Tsubaki ignored Ashizawa and turned to Shibata further back in the kitchen.

"I'd say just enough for two people."

"Tsubaki-san..."

"We got the order. Get back to the floor."

Tsubaki glanced briefly up at Ashizawa, then didn't look at him again.

After he'd changed, Ashizawa lingered in the back room before going home. If he left now, he knew he would regret it. When the door opened, he looked up expectantly.

"I'm beat! Hey, what are you still doing here?"

Shibata was the one who came in. The adrenaline that had coursed momentarily through Ashizawa's body disappeared.

"It was a long night. I'm sorry I screwed up."

Ashizawa stood up and bowed.

"Screwed up? Oh, with the soup?"

Shibata sat down heavily and picked up a box of cigarettes from the table before changing. He put one between his lips and looked at Ashizawa to confirm his suspicion. Ashizawa nodded, then bowed again.

"Tsubaki-san told me himself that we weren't serving it, but I was so worked up about taking an order that I forgot anyway."

"It's fine, really. There was enough for the order, so everything worked out fine. You can't obsess about every little thing. What's done is done," Shibata said, brushing it off indifferently. But Ashizawa couldn't let it go.

"Is Tsubaki-san still in the kitchen?"

After his mistake, Tsubaki had clearly been upset and had refused to answer Ashizawa when he called to him from the floor for the rest of the night.

Shibata had come to his rescue again and again, but seeing Tsubaki's broad back turned on him made Ashizawa want to cry. He would have felt so much better if Tsubaki had just yelled at him. But of course he

would never do that with customers around. His silence terrified Ashizawa.

He felt Tsubaki's cold stare accusing him and his demeanor out on the floor had suffered as a result. He hadn't made any big mistakes, but he'd failed as a waiter.

So Ashizawa had been waiting for Tsubaki to come in so he could offer him an apology, but...

"He's long gone."

"Gone? But he didn't come in to change."

"He lives near here, so he just goes home in his uniform."

"When did he leave?"

Shibata checked his watch. "About twenty minutes ago."

"Twenty minutes? Then it's too late to catch him."

All the energy drained out of Ashizawa's body. He might have gone home without changing because he knew Ashizawa was waiting for him in the back room. That thought only depressed him more.

He'd upset Tsubaki so badly that he didn't even want to see Ashizawa anymore. His heart ached.

"Now what?" He held his head in his hands. "How can I get Tsubaki-san to ever forgive me?"

"Maybe you're wondering why he got like that over such a little thing—"

"No, I understand it."

Ashizawa looked up at Shibata. "He told me ahead of time, so it's my fault for messing up."

Shibata chuckled, as if Ashizawa's frantic answer

was finally too much for him.

"Shibata-san—"

"Tsubaki's not upset that you made a mistake."

"What do you mean?"

Ashizawa blinked several times. Shibata shrugged.

"He believes in always giving the customer what they want," Shibata explained, slowly exhaling a stream of smoke.

"I understand that."

Everything about the restaurant made that clear.

"Obviously, most of the time we can prepare everything that's on the menu. Actually a restaurant run a la carte is really hard work. Unlike with fixed courses, we have to be ready to make whatever someone orders. If the customer wants something, Tsubaki can't refuse them just because he doesn't have the ingredients to make it. They did him the favor of coming to his restaurant to eat his food, so he wants to do everything in his power to treat them well."

White smoke curled up to the ceiling. Through the curtain of smoke, Shibata gave him a placid smile.

"You understand Tsubaki-san so well, Shibata-san."

"Not really. He's just an awkward guy. There's a part of him that only knows how to express his feelings through his food. He might have made you feel bad, but he's not a bad guy. Try to forgive him."

"No, everything he did was perfectly justified."

Ashizawa shook his head fervently. He was the one who needed to be forgiven.

"I'm the one who forced my way into Tsubaki-san's personal territory. And now that I'm here, working in his restaurant, I want to be closer to all of you. I'm sorry if that's presumptuous of me."

When Ashizawa had started, this had been for work, to get to know Tsubaki better and for him to get to know Ashizawa better.

But now things were different.

He still wanted to know Tsubaki and his restaurant better, but it had nothing to do with his job.

"You're a very positive person, aren't you?"

"It's not good to be negative."

It was easy to be negative. But even if Ashizawa did regret things, he always decided to look forward in the end. He'd always been like that, ever since he was a student.

Shibata burst out laughing at Ashizawa's answer.

"You're really great, you know that?" Shibata said heartily, then turned serious. "Have you considered anyone else for this restaurant of yours?"

"...No."

Ashizawa was caught off-guard by the sudden change in topic, but he answered honestly.

He had kept going to work during the last two weeks of working at Individu, but it had only been to take care of his current projects. He hadn't done anything with the new restaurant.

Perhaps his father had talked to Yanaginuma, because there had been no requests for updates about the project.

That was why, for the time being, Ashizawa was

trying not to think about whether Tsubaki would listen to him or whether he would accept the offer. He was just focusing on doing the work he'd been given.

"I see. In that case, I hope you can make it through the month for him."

"You don't want me to give up?"

Shibata shook his head. "You were right when you said he can't stay in a place like this forever. He has enough talent to make it big, with a huge restaurant and his name world-renowned. I don't know what's going on in his mind, but I know he's thought about the future."

Shibata smiled gently.

"But he's stubborn in a lot of ways and gets intimidated. And he's very awkward, remember. So he can't just destroy this home he's built for himself. This restaurant is important to him and so are the customers who come here and all of us on the staff. He cares about us, and we're grateful for that, but as a chef myself I want him to do better for himself."

"Shibata-san..."

Shibata saw Tsubaki as a coworker and a friend, as distant but also kind. There must be something about Tsubaki. Ashizawa didn't know what that something was, but it might keep him from making any progress.

"I wonder what it is," Ashizawa said softly. "I started helping out here in order to understand Tsubaki-san better. But there's so much I still don't know."

Shibata ground out the last of his cigarette in the ashtray.

"If you want to understand Tsubaki, come to the restaurant early tomorrow, before we open."

"What happens then?"

Hope pounded in Ashizawa's chest.

"Maybe you'll understand and maybe you won't. Only you know the answer to that."

Shibata gave an ambiguous smile. Ashizawa wasn't quite sure how to take that. But even without understanding, he knew that Shibata was trying to help.

And Shibata wasn't alone.

Masatsuka and Takagi had both been composed and hadn't blamed Ashizawa for his mistakes, just comforted and supported him. The fact that such wonderful people were being so nice to him only encouraged Ashizawa to feel pathetic, as if he had let them down.

Even after he got home, Ashizawa couldn't stop thinking about the restaurant.

Seeing Tsubaki's naked body in the back room. How shockingly nice he had been to him, only to turn around and not even look him in the eyes when he'd made a mistake.

Shibata, the man who had gone to school with Tsubaki, called him a stubborn, cowardly, awkward man.

But Ashizawa still believed that that wasn't the same Tsubaki that he knew. Maybe there was something deep inside Tsubaki that Ashizawa didn't know about.

Ashizawa wanted to understand him and that desire had only grown stronger. He wanted to know more about this Tsubaki that he still didn't know. He wanted to know what Tsubaki was thinking, what was in his heart, and why he was being so stubborn.

Ashizawa didn't know where these feelings had

come from. But still, he wanted to know. This powerful desire had taken root in his heart.

Dawn came without Ashizawa sleeping a wink.

He headed to Kunitachi station at half past eight in the morning to go by the restaurant before it opened.

It was Saturday morning, so the trains out of the city were empty and he managed to doze in one of the seats.

It was nearly spring, so the sunlight was gentle and pleasant. He wanted to give his body over to the gentle breeze that caressed his cheek, but fought back this desire and walked to Individu.

He was a little nervous.

He had taken what Shibata told him on faith and had come to the restaurant early, but he had no idea what he would see there. Ashizawa felt as if he were robbing Tsubaki of his secrets, which made his conscience twinge slightly.

But he really did want to know more about Tsubaki.

He followed the familiar path to the restaurant one step at a time, then stopped a slight distance away.

He took slow steps forward, deciding not to go in by the door that had the "Closed" sign hanging on it, but instead to peer in the windows. The shutters and potted plants got in his way, but he could just barely see inside.

"Oh!"

He spotted Tsubaki at once. He was kneeling on the floor.

Ashizawa strained his eyes and finally realized what Tsubaki was doing. He was polishing the tables and chairs with a cloth.

The staff always cleaned up before dinner, but there was never any noticeable trash and Ashizawa had figured that Tsubaki hired people to come in several times a week to clean it.

That may still have been the case, but it was more likely that Tsubaki cleaned it up himself.

He polished each table and each chair with loving attention. Seeing him like this touched Ashizawa's heart. He looked so absorbed that Ashizawa hesitated to interrupt him.

It was obvious how much Tsubaki loved his restaurant.

Once he had finally finished polishing the chair, he wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and slowly turned around to look at Ashizawa.

"Wait, no—"

It didn't seem possible, but Tsubaki marched unswervingly to the window. He was looking straight at Ashizawa, who stood outside. Ashizawa couldn't run and he couldn't hide. Tsubaki stood in front of Ashizawa and frowned at him.

"Um, I wasn't trying to spy on you, I was just—"

Tsubaki had said nothing, but Ashizawa hurried to explain himself.

Tsubaki gazed at Ashizawa for a long moment

from inside the restaurant, then jerked his chin at him, indicating he should come inside.

"I—I have some errands I really need to take care of..."

But Tsubaki couldn't hear what Ashizawa said. Knowing that, Ashizawa felt pathetic for making excuses. He wouldn't score any points by trying to run away now, so Ashizawa went into the building obediently.

"Good morning..."

"What are you doing here so early?"

Tsubaki's voice was ruthless as Ashizawa entered. His forehead was cut by deep furrows, putting Ashizawa on edge.

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't ask you to apologize. I asked you what you're doing here." His voice was harsh.

Maybe Tsubaki was still mad at him for last night. Ashizawa fought back his desire to run and prepared himself to answer calmly.

"I was watching."

He balled his hands into fists.

"Watching what?"

"You."

"Me?"

Tsubaki gaped even more. "How did you know I would be here this early?"

"Well..."

"Well?"

"Shibata-san told me."

"Shibata?"

"I'm sorry."

Ashizawa apologized before Tsubaki could say anything.

"Ashizawa..."

"I was waiting for you yesterday in the back room, so I could apologize. Shibata-san tried to make me feel better and he told me that you came to the restaurant early in the morning."

"You wanted to apologize?"

"About the soup."

There was a moment's pause, then Tsubaki remembered. "Ah."

He sighed and Ashizawa shrank back. He was still mad after all.

"I felt bad for ignoring what you told me and taking the order. I think I was a little excited yesterday since it was my first time taking orders."

It was a simple mistake—he knew it now that he explained himself. Ashizawa couldn't accept that idea until Shibata had talked to him. It was true that he'd made a mistake, but why was Tsubaki so angry at him for it? To tell the truth, he'd felt a little disappointed.

But after Shibata had talked to him, Tsubaki's anger had seemed more reasonable. And now that he'd seen him cleaning the restaurant so early this morning, he knew he'd been naïve.

"Why were you excited?" Tsubaki asked mildly.

"Because I forced myself onto Individu's staff. At first I felt really distanced from everyone and I knew I wasn't in the inner circle, so I felt really isolated. But at the beginning of the third week, I felt like I was being

accepted as one of the staff when you let me start taking orders. It made me happy."

He had hardly been there a month, so maybe it was arrogant of him to say he had already been accepted. If he were in Tsubaki's position, he might think so. But Ashizawa had wanted to do his best. That impulse was an honest one.

Ashizawa hung his head.

After a brief silence, he heard unbelievable words pass overhead.

"I'm the one who owes you an apology."

Ashizawa looked up in surprise. As if trying to avoid his eyes, Tsubaki covered his face with a large hand.

"I wasn't angry at you—I was angry at myself," Tsubaki went on with difficulty, frowning.

"With yourself?" Ashizawa parroted back without understanding.

"If I hadn't knocked over the soup in the first place, there wouldn't have been a problem. It was my mistake that made you mess up, and that made me angry."

He put a hand to his temple and shook his head slightly.

"I knew you were waiting for me last night. But I knew if you apologized to me I would say something horrible to you. So I just left without telling you. I'm sorry."

Ashizawa knew Tsubaki's apology was genuine and it slipped smoothly into Ashizawa's heart. His chest felt strangely tight for a few moments.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"You're disappointed, aren't you?"

Tsubaki brushed his hair off his forehead and turned to look Ashizawa in the face with a sardonic smile.

His earlier harshness was gone and his eyes had become serene and gentle. Ashizawa's heart ached even more. He didn't know how to respond to this expression he never imagined he'd see.

"Why... would I be?"

He remembered what happened in the back room the day before and his heart pounded.

"I'm a man of very narrow vision and sentiment. I'm not like Shibata, who can talk to anyone. I pretend to know what I'm doing, but the reality is quite different. I have enormous pride and I'll do whatever it takes to protect myself."

He looked almost sad. An unnameable emotion welled up in Ashizawa.

Tsubaki had dropped his guard for him. His face was somehow boyish, containing melancholy, gentleness, and naiveté. Ashizawa had no idea how to describe it.

"That's not true."

All he could do was refute what Tsubaki had said.

"Ashizawa..."

"You never disappointed me."

He didn't want Tsubaki to see the chaos in his heart and his voice wavered. He didn't know how to express what it was he felt.

"It's okay. You don't have to lie."

"I'm not!" Ashizawa denied Tsubaki's charge

immediately. He really wasn't lying.

"I told you this the very first time we talked, Tsubaki-san. I didn't decide that I wanted to work with you for superficial reasons. Of course, I had no way of really knowing your personality, but that doesn't mean I made you into some kind of perfect superman in my mind."

He had judged Tsubaki's character by the food he offered and the atmosphere of his restaurant.

He was stubborn and awkward, which Ashizawa hadn't expected, but that didn't disappoint him.

If he could make such exquisite food and show such concern for others, that meant that there had to be some weakness in him, too, Ashizawa realized.

Ashizawa couldn't help but be grateful that he'd been touched by the gentle and frank aspects of this man, who was much subtler than he'd imagined.

"Really?"

"Why would I lie? I already told you: I want to know you better so that you can accept me. What possible gain is there for me to lie, then?" Ashizawa argued crisply.

Tsubaki's eyes were wide for several moments, then he began to laugh quietly.

"...Tsubaki-san?"

"I'm sorry. It's just... your opinion is so refreshing and I just felt so free that I had to laugh."

"My clients often tell me that. I'm the kind of person who needs a clear yes or no answer. Whatever the outcome, frank advice is what I live by. They say it's not how they imagined I would be from the way I look."

"They probably feel a disconnect when someone who looks as easygoing as you gives such a strong opinion as you did just now."

Tsubaki laughed for a long moment after that, as if he'd fallen into his own trap, remembering something. His laugh cleared the tension between them.

Ashizawa waited for Tsubaki to stop laughing before speaking again.

"I can help you clean. It'll go faster with two."

"Yeah—thanks. But are you sure?"

"Of course. I'm already here, so there's no point in sitting around doing nothing. And if it's not a problem for you, I'd like to help with the lunch service to make up for yesterday. Is that all right?"

"It'd help more if you took care of our people."

"What's the staff eating today? Will Shibata-san make it for us?" Ashizawa asked, heart pounding, and Tsubaki burst out laughing uncontrollably again.

"Did I say something funny?"

"I was just thinking it'd probably be a lot of fun to work with you."

Ashizawa knew these words, uttered between laughs, were only a joke, but they made his heart sing anyway.

"Have you changed your mind about my offer?"

Ashizawa asked, half joking, and Tsubaki shrugged.

"I don't know about that, but if you're so desperate to talk about it, it might be interesting to hear what you have to say."

Ashizawa beamed. "Then why don't I tell you about it while we clean?"

His mood improved by Tsubaki's newfound

openness, Ashizawa discussed the project while they cleaned. He told him about what Yanaginuma hoped to do without revealing too much and about how he would consult with him.

Tsubaki didn't say much in response to that, but Ashizawa could tell he was listening intently.

"I think it's a very tempting proposition for a chef. You'd have a lot of control over the details and a defined audience," Tsubaki commented at last.

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

"I'm not the right man for it, but I'm sure you'll find somebody great."

Tsubaki didn't neglect to toss off this last barb. Ashizawa laughed. He knew Tsubaki didn't want him to have any expectations, but it made him feel a little sad.

In his heart, he knew no other chef would ever be right.

Chapter Six

"You've been going to that restaurant of yours pretty often, haven't you?" Yanaginuma began casually at their first meeting in several weeks.

Ashizawa was shaken by this observation, but didn't show it and smiled ruefully at the idea that his father had leaked the secret.

"I'm not going there to eat. It would be more correct to say I'm working there." Ashizawa corrected Yanaginuma as he stirred his cappuccino with a spoon.

"Working there...how?"

Yanaginuma's eyes widened in surprise.

"It's just what it sounds like, Yanaginuma-san. My idiot son has taken half his vacation time to go work as a waiter at this restaurant so that he and the chef can get to know each other better."

"Idiot son' is a little strong," Ashizawa objected.

"It's the truth," his father retorted with a laugh.

"You understand that if he rejects the offer, you'll have wasted an entire month?" Yanaginuma voiced this perfectly reasonable concern, but Ashizawa only shrugged.

"I don't do my work expecting it to be a waste of time."

"I suppose not. But if you end up looking like an idiot, don't say we didn't warn you." His father flicked

the ashes from the end of his cigarette.

Ashizawa was meeting with his father and Yanaginuma in the lounge of the hotel that housed the Grand Royale. It was Wednesday, so he didn't have to go to Individu.

"Don't you think it's about time I found out who'll be running my restaurant?"

"Please be patient."

Yanaginuma smiled, and Ashizawa evaded his request with his own smile.

"I'm not sure I can."

"It's against the rules of my job to discuss anything not yet contracted. You left the matter of selecting the chef to me. I need you to be patient just a little longer."

"You're a tough one, Masaki."

"My son gets his stubbornness from me, you know. You might as well give up."

His father spoke as if Ashizawa wasn't even there.

"Even if my idiot son did take half of his vacation to work as a waiter, I'll never reveal where!"

"There's no way around it. I haven't even begun negotiations."

"But just thinking about the taste of that bread you brought me gives me some hope to hold onto."

"I agree."

Yanaginuma nodded at Ashizawa's father's words. Ashizawa smiled at the two of them. They were talking about the bread he'd brought them after his first day at Individu.

Ashizawa had heard that Yanaginuma had tasted it

too, thanks to his father, but this was the first time he had heard his reaction.

"The recipe belongs to the chef, but it was baked by the sous-chef."

"Any sous-chef who can make bread like that gets my respect."

"He told me he's better at making bread than the chef is."

"Oho." Yanaginuma sounded truly impressed. "You can tell a lot about a restaurant from its bread. The food must be something special."

"I guarantee it," Ashizawa declared fervently.

Yanaginuma laughed cheerfully. "Where there's a good chef, there'll be a good staff and good customers, and that improves the restaurant. When the restaurant improves, the customers and staff feel more relaxed, and that improves the food. It seems that sort of synergy is in full effect at your restaurant."

"Yes! Yes, that's exactly it!" Ashizawa agreed, his fists bunching with his enthusiasm. He was so glad Yanaginuma understood what he was trying to say.

"I'd never felt that before, but I felt it in this restaurant. That's why, if possible, I'd like to enlist the entire staff for the next restaurant. Of course, given the new scale, more staff will be necessary, but since they'll be working with the chef they need to be people he can trust."

Since starting work at Individu, Ashizawa had come to understand this.

Without Tsubaki, the restaurant wouldn't work, but Tsubaki wouldn't prosper on his own. The restaurant

succeeded because of everyone.

"Of course, even if he moves to the next restaurant, I don't think he wants to lose his old one. I've had a lot of trouble coming up with a solution to that particular problem."

"Oh, to be young again," Yanaginuma murmured earnestly.

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you who it is, but just talking about this project gets me excited."

"Don't worry about it," Yanaginuma laughed.

"I think it's wonderful you've met a chef you feel so passionate about. If you feel that strongly about him, he must be something special. You can mention my name to him, if it helps."

Ashizawa's surprise showed on his face.

"But we still don't know if he'll accept or not."

"But you expect him to, correct?"

"Yes, of course." Ashizawa answered without hesitation.

"Then I need to show some good faith, too. I hope that by revealing my name, this chef agrees to be part of our project."

Giving Ashizawa permission to reveal his name showed how much Yanaginuma trusted him. Ashizawa recognized that and took it seriously.

This wasn't a game. This was a job for both of them, a serious gamble.

"I'll do everything I can to that end."

Ashizawa had established a good rapport with Tsubaki after helping him all day on Saturday.

That was the first time he'd been allowed into

the kitchen, and Shibata had joined them to prepare the food. Ashizawa's experience with cooking was limited, so he couldn't do very much to help. All he did was cut vegetables and stir the soup, but even that was satisfying.

When he'd asked questions about the food, they had answered him. But when Tsubaki smiled at him, that made Ashizawa happier than anything else.

The way Ashizawa prepared himself every time he talked to Tsubaki and the fact that he loved seeing Tsubaki's smile made him feel like a high school girl, which embarrassed him. But part of him couldn't deny those impulses. He wanted to understand Tsubaki, and that desire was something like love.

"How about you, Masaki?"

Ashizawa's heart had flown off to Tsubaki and he'd stopped listening to the conversation.

"I'm sorry, I was thinking about something else. What did you say?"

"I was thinking we could all have dinner together."

"I'm afraid I have to decline today," Ashizawa glanced at the time.

"What's wrong? It's so rare for you to give up a chance to eat at Yanaginuma-san's restaurant."

"I haven't had Saturdays off for a while, so I was planning to go shopping. Plus I'm not dressed for it. I think I'd really better not."

Ashizawa indicated the casual cotton pants that clothed his legs.

Suits were too elaborate for going to work at

Individu. He wore jeans or cotton pants with a sweater and a jacket, and that was enough.

He was afraid he would start getting used to it, since he had dressed for the restaurant even though it was closed today.

As a consequence, he had met with Yanaginuma in his casual clothes. Perhaps aware of his wardrobe, Yanaginuma and his father had only extended the invitation out of politeness.

"Well, the next time we talk, I expect an update!"

"I'll do my best to provide you with one."

Yanaginuma had applied a slight amount of pressure with that last comment. But since he was the client, it was only to be expected.

Ashizawa was just glad he was willing to wait so long to find out who the chef of his new restaurant was going to be.

After leaving the two men, he went to Mitsukoshi and Matsuya.

It was the middle of the week, so Ginza's streets were empty and Ashizawa could shop without stress. He picked up a necktie and a tie pin, then headed to his favorite designer to order a spring suit and jacket.

"I hardly recognized you, Ashizawa-san!"

One of the salespeople he knew looked at him in surprise when he came into the store.

"This is for a job I'm working on."

After he finished working at Individu, whether or not Tsubaki accepted his offer, Ashizawa would return to his old life. He would dress in designer suits and conduct business with a laptop, cell phone, and fax machine, monitoring restaurants' economic data.

But why did this life that he had taken for granted seem so shallow now?

Ashizawa had always had a fierce pride in his work. He thought the work of a consultant suited him and he liked watching his results improve.

But he got a different sort of enjoyment out of working at Individu.

When he was there, he had direct interaction with the customers. *It's wonderful, I'm so happy, this is so much fun*, they would say. And he also knew immediately when they weren't satisfied.

It was hard work keeping track of the customers' moods, but he couldn't deny that it was rewarding.

But Ashizawa would only be going to Individu for one more week. Really, only five more days.

He had closed the distance between himself and Tsubaki. It had taken time, but he believed he'd built a certain trust between them. Maybe that was just wishful thinking.

But something had changed. It was a little late now, but he was struck by fundamental doubts.

When they'd discussed business, Tsubaki hadn't trusted him. Ashizawa had started working at his restaurant so that he would trust him and listen to his offer.

Even if they didn't end up working together,

Ashizawa thought he would be satisfied with developing a relationship of trust between them. He wanted Tsubaki to trust him very much.

But he could see their last day together looming before him and part of him wondered if that would really be enough.

To trust and earn trust, and end their partnership with only that. *Is that enough?* he wondered, and in that instant he felt a hole rip open in his heart.

"Ow—"

"Is something the matter, Ashizawa-san?"

His heart had cried out with his voice

"No, I'm fine. When the clothes are ready, have them sent to my apartment, please."

He filled out the delivery form, then dragged his heavy limbs out of the store.

What was this void he felt squeezing his heart into pulp? He didn't know where it had come from. The only thing he did know was that his connection to Tsubaki was about to disappear.

Of course, even if the business talks didn't go well, he could always go to Individu and continue experiencing the taste of Tsubaki's food. If he was very lucky, Tsubaki might even come out to talk to him.

But if he left with the promise to come again to eat that wonderful food and chat about meaningless things with the chef, the relationship would be stagnant—he would have made no progress. Even if they worked together as client and consultant, most of their meetings would be like that, too.

Now that he had actually worked with Tsubaki,

could Ashizawa be satisfied with being nothing more than his business partner? He doubted it.

"What am I thinking?"

He didn't understand the reason for these complicated feelings. He couldn't even say what it was he was hoping for.

He went to a coffee shop in an old building to calm down. It was a quiet place he came to often.

A waitress greeted him as soon as he opened the door. "Hello. Table for one?"

"Yes, thank you."

The moment Ashizawa answered, his eyes fell on a man sitting by himself.

He was sitting at a table next to the window, absorbed in the magazine he was reading. The glasses he was wearing made him look intelligent and serene.

"Actually, I just saw a friend of mine."

"Oh, all right."

Ashizawa walked toward the table, feeling positively drawn to it. He stood so that he blocked the light and cast a shadow over the man's magazine. Eventually, the man looked up.

"Ashizawa?"

"Hello."

His voice trembled slightly as he smiled awkwardly at Tsubaki, who looked up at him in surprise. Since he had the day off from work, his hair was very casually styled and his bangs fell across his face. He was dressed with simple grace, in a button-down shirt and leather pants.

"What a surprise. What are you doing here?"

"I was doing some shopping and came here to get some coffee. I saw you, so...do you mind if I sit down?"

"Go ahead," Tsubaki answered with a smile. Ashizawa was relieved.

The waitress waited for Ashizawa to take his seat, then brought a glass of water and a menu. Ashizawa ordered the house blend.

"But what are you doing here, Tsubaki-san? You're not waiting for someone, are you?"

As soon as he asked the question, Ashizawa realized he'd never heard anyone talk about Tsubaki's love life. He'd never had a conversation about the private lives of any of the staff.

Shibata was the only one who wore a ring on his left ring finger, and he did so without ceremony.

"Unfortunately, no. I wish I were, but I'm not very popular."

Tsubaki chuckled at the prying question. Ashizawa was confused by how relieved that answer made him feel, but he went on. "How can you say that? If you ever came out on the floor, your looks would make you the talk of the town in a heartbeat."

"You must be thinking of yourself. Masatsuka tells me he's seen some customers with their eyes on you."

Tsubaki skillfully turned the conversation around on him.

"He's making things up. Though I do know some who keep a close eye on him and Takagi."

They ended their empty conversation there and Ashizawa returned to the original subject. "But if you're

not here on a date, what are you doing here?"

His eyes fell on the magazine in Tsubaki's hands. He was surprised to see it was a gourmet magazine.

Noticing the direction of Ashizawa's gaze, Tsubaki awkwardly closed the magazine to hide the page he was looking at.

"I like to study up on my day off and go to restaurants or bistros I'm worried about."

"I didn't know that."

Ashizawa was surprised.

"I always saw you as someone with a strong confidence in your own flavor who didn't care about other restaurants."

"I thought I told you—I'm a man of narrow vision and sentiment."

Tsubaki shrugged and pulled off his glasses. His eyes were downcast and melancholy. They pierced Ashizawa's heart. Gentle and serene, with a rare charm...Ashizawa's heart pounded at how defenseless he looked.

Calm down, he told himself desperately.

"I wish I could walk away from the world and not need to worry about what anyone else thinks."

"The chef I told you about, the one who's going to be the owner of the new restaurant, always worried about other chefs, too."

"You see? Man is, in the end, a creature of desires. No use fighting it," Tsubaki said, half in resignation. Ashizawa was dazzled by all the expressions he never saw in the restaurant. "Then can I ask you where you're planning to go tonight?"

"A place called Musigny in the second district."
 "Oh, Musigny?"

Tsubaki raised an eyebrow at Ashizawa's quick response. "You know it?"

"Very well," Ashizawa answered with a smile. "I've worked with the owner before. They changed chefs last year, I think, and their reviews improved."

"That's what I've heard. Another magazine I read said it's impossible to get in on the weekends without a reservation. I might not be able to just drop in today, either."

Tsubaki stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"If you want, I could give them a call," Ashizawa suggested hesitantly.

"No, that's—" Tsubaki raised his eyebrows.

"It's a weekday, so I'm sure it'll be fine, but if they get a call from someone they know it'll be easier to get in. One person won't be any problem at all."

"Ashizawa."

"Yes?"

"Do you have any plans tonight? A date?"

"Are you still teasing me about earlier?"

Ashizawa smirked at the joke. Tsubaki laughed and denied it.

"I finished shopping, so I was just going to go home. Why?"

"Because if you wanted to, I was going to invite you to come with me to dinner."

"Me?" Ashizawa asked, his voice rising in surprise at Tsubaki's hesitant invitation.

"It's not much fun eating alone and I want to eat at

a French restaurant with someone else. But I won't force you. Although..."

Tsubaki rambled uncharacteristically.

His argument looped back on itself, as if even he didn't know what he was going to say next. But he got the point across.

Going out to eat together—Ashizawa had never expected an invitation like this. Inside, he was jumping for joy.

Just because they worked together at a French restaurant didn't mean they'd ever eaten together. When Ashizawa had been a customer there, they had been no more than chef and customer. Was this a stroke of luck?

Honestly, he wanted to accept Tsubaki's invitation without hesitation. But he needed reassurance. If Tsubaki told him it was just a joke, Ashizawa didn't think he would ever recover.

"More importantly, do you want to spend your evening with me, Tsubaki-san?"

"Of course. And if you know the restaurant, I'd appreciate the escort."

Tsubaki's encouraging response let Ashizawa accept the invitation gratefully.

"I'll give them a call."

"Do you need the number?"

"I have it in my cell phone."

Ashizawa checked the number on his phone on his way out of the cafe.

Standing outside the doors, he waited for Tsubaki to come out. It was hard to hold back his excitement.

Unfortunately, the owner of Musigny wasn't at the restaurant that night, but the man who had once been the *maitre d'* had been promoted to manager and he greeted Ashizawa and Tsubaki.

"It's wonderful to see you again. The owner also gives you his regards."

"Return the sentiment for me, please. I'm sorry for barging in like this out of the blue."

Before reaching the restaurant, Ashizawa had asked if Tsubaki wanted to be introduced or not. He'd said that he preferred to keep his identity a secret since this was basically a reconnaissance mission into enemy territory.

Tsubaki was proven right when they passed the restaurant's twenty tables, almost all of them full, even though it was the middle of the week. But the two men were led not to one of the free tables on the floor, but to a private room.

"Oh, there's no need for something this extravagant, really. Thank you."

"I won't hear of anything less. Please enjoy yourselves."

The manager bowed deeply and left.

"Are they trying to show off?" Tsubaki asked in a low whisper.

"I don't think so. Even if I'd asked for it, the room fee is only about the same as a glass of champagne."

Ashizawa had worked with this restaurant for a long time, but the relationship had ended with the job. They had simply kept in touch in case they ever needed each other again.

But when a waiter appeared and said he had something for them from the owner, he brought an entire bottle of champagne, not just a glass. The *sommelier* filled their flutes. They waited for him to disappear again, then the two men smiled at each other.

"If you ever come back to my restaurant, I'm only going to give you a free glass of champagne, so don't get your hopes up."

"Understood."

It was only an offhanded joke about the situation, but Ashizawa suddenly felt as if Tsubaki had summoned the reality that awaited them.

"Oh, I see. Their menu is aimed at women. This place seems a little more Italian than French, I think... What's wrong, Ashizawa?" Tsubaki noticed Ashizawa's eyes on him and looked up from the menu.

"Oh—nothing. What are you going to have?"

Ashizawa fought down the feeling of his fraying emotions and looked at the menu.

When the restaurant had opened, they'd been aiming for classic French; but now, conscious of their clientele, they had added much friendlier fare to the menu.

"The owner told me he wanted to create a new *grande maison*, but I guess he gave up on that."

Tsubaki ordered scallops and caviar for his appetizer, chestnut cream soup, and guinea fowl with red wine sauce. Ashizawa ordered the lobster with a side of smoked anglerfish liver and a seafood *millefeuille*.

"They seem to be going in a different direction now."

"They reach their target audience, so why not? I've heard they've even rented themselves out for weddings lately."

The walls were covered in glass, evoking the ubiquitous cafes of Paris.

"Is the restaurant you want to make like this?"

It surprised Ashizawa that Tsubaki would be the one to bring up that subject. He wondered why. But he could hardly pass up this opportunity. Ashizawa began his discussion carefully.

"It's for the same age group, but the restaurant will have a different concept. We want it to be something you dress up to go to on an important day."

"Is it going to be a *grande maison*?"

"The ambiance will be, at least. A *grande maison* is the kind of restaurant you only go to once a year at most though, right? What we're hoping for is a restaurant where people can come back as often as they want to. Maybe not once a month, but maybe every season the customer can return to enjoy a new dish. The idea is still vague, though."

"What kind of food will you serve?"

"That depends on the chef, of course. As long as the chef thinks it's acceptable, we don't really mind if it's classic French or *nouvelle cuisine*, or if it has Italian flourishes, or even Japanese. Though we don't want it to become a fusion restaurant."

The waiter brought their appetizers, which were arranged attractively on the plate, no doubt with the female customer in mind. But the taste was unremarkable.

Tsubaki frowned at the word "fusion."

"If we were to do that, it would change the concept of the restaurant. But as long as the reasoning is clear, I don't think we'd refuse even that. When I talked to the owner, he wanted a chef with a firm grounding in French cooking as an absolute minimum, which means that's the only restriction and everything else is up to me to decide."

The overriding premise was to start a French restaurant.

"Is this owner a chef at a *grande maison*?"

"I won't confirm or deny that."

If they limited the field to the *grande maisons*, Tsubaki would have limited choices.

Yanaginuma had given Ashizawa permission to reveal his name, but still it wasn't very easy to mention. Tsubaki saw that, so he didn't try to press Ashizawa further.

"You told me it was someone who owned their own restaurant, right? But then why don't they want to set one of their young chefs up in their own restaurant?"

It was a reasonable question. Ashizawa chose his words carefully.

"He thought about it. But as I said before, he doesn't want this venture tied to his name. He wants to try something new. But he still wants to support a young chef."

"Then shouldn't he find someone who doesn't already have their own restaurant?" Their conversation began to get heated and, between the two of them, they quickly emptied the champagne.

"Would you like some wine, gentlemen?" the *sommelier* asked.

Tsubaki nodded. "Something that goes with the meal. A red wine?"

"Yes, I like reds," Ashizawa answered when Tsubaki looked at him.

"Something in this price range."

He pointed at a price on the menu, then left the rest to the *sommelier*.

"Not to change the subject, but I heard you recommended some wine to the customers. Masatsuka was very proud."

"Oh, it wasn't that impressive. I love wine, but I don't really know much about it."

The wine the *sommelier* selected was, appropriately enough, a 1990 Chambolle Musigny. They allowed it to breathe, uncorking it so it could take in the air while they waited for the main course to arrive.

"Have you ever worked with wine in your job?"

"I've helped out a few wine bars. Also, the client in the current job is an old friend of my father's, so I've learned a lot about wine from him."

Ashizawa had first drunk wine in high school: a Chateau Margaux from the year he was born, to celebrate getting into the school he wanted. It was a luxury he was too childish to appreciate and the majority of it wound up in his father's belly, but he would never forget the sweetness of it, nor the way it felt like velvet on his tongue.

"I'm sure my parents said it was too extravagant. I don't know what the owner was thinking."

Tsubaki suppressed a smile.

"He has a son of his own, I understand, but he wasn't able to give him many things, so he said he gave them to me to make up for that."

"Hmm," Tsubaki grunted ambiguously, frowning slightly.

"The owner and my father have been friends ever since my father was contracted to work for him. They're like best friends now and he's helped me out in a lot of ways. He was the one who asked me to take over this project, so I accepted even though I feel like there's a lot of pressure. I learned almost everything I know about French cuisine from him. He also said some of the things you've told me, so I got the idea that you two might work well together." Ashizawa smiled pleasantly.

"The chef of a *grande maison* said the same things I said?" Tsubaki sounded dubious, but Ashizawa didn't pursue it.

"He told me himself that when he was younger, he was quite zealous. But now he wants to open a restaurant that gets back to the basics of what a chef does."

"And what is that?"

"To have people eat food that they find delicious."

The main course was brought in. Ashizawa had ordered a *millefeuille* of pie crust filled with seafood cream sauce. The crust was crispy and not very easy to eat, but Ashizawa liked the dish so much that he ordered it whenever he saw it on a menu.

"A seafood *millefeuille*..."

A shadow crossed Tsubaki's face. Ashizawa was

a little uneasy. Did he not like it? "I first had it when I celebrated getting into high school. I guess it's a happy memory for me."

Tsubaki picked up his knife and fork without comment and began to eat, cutting up his food and washing it down with wine. He said nothing during all this time.

"Shall we get some cheese after the meal?"

"No, thank you."

"Then how about just some coffee?" Ashizawa pressed, despite Tsubaki's curtness.

Tsubaki was clearly upset.

Ashizawa wondered if he'd touched a nerve, but he couldn't think of anything he'd said that might have done it. Maybe something in their discussion of the restaurant had set him off, but he didn't know what.

"Tsubaki-san, did I say something wrong?"

"No."

Ashizawa had asked earnestly, but Tsubaki didn't feel like explaining, apparently. Tsubaki drained his cup of coffee as soon as it arrived, then asked for the check. He took out his wallet and gave his credit card to the waiter.

"I'll pay my half."

"Don't worry about it. I invited you out."

His voice was as blunt as ever, but there was something more to it.

"Why are you angry, Tsubaki-san?"

Once they'd left the restaurant, Ashizawa tried again, addressing Tsubaki's back as he walked in silence. But Tsubaki didn't acknowledge him.

"Tsubaki-san!"

He shouted his name, and this time Tsubaki stopped.

"Have I done something to upset you?"

"No."

"Then why do you look so annoyed? Why are you ignoring me?"

Normally Ashizawa would be cowed into giving up at this point, but he'd had enough wine that he now pursued Tsubaki with uncharacteristic persistence. He couldn't stand to be turned away without knowing the reason why. Finally, he thought he'd taken a step closer to Tsubaki at long last, and now—

"Can I ask you something?"

Deep lines cut across Tsubaki's forehead and his voice was rough as he spoke.

"What is it?"

"This owner you keep talking about."

"Yes?"

Tsubaki fell silent for a moment, seeming to hesitate, but he opened his mouth again with new resolve.

"Is it Shozo Yanaginuma from the Grand Royale?" he asked quietly.

Ashizawa gasped. He wasn't sure how to handle this.

But there was only one week left. Even if he was willing to respect Tsubaki's decision, Tsubaki still needed time to think it over. And Yanaginuma had given Ashizawa permission to reveal his name. Hiding the truth now would accomplish nothing.

"Yes. I'm working on this project for Chef Shozo Yanaginuma."

Tsubaki raised his eyebrows slightly at his declaration. Something about Yanaginuma's name had upset Tsubaki after all.

"But how did you know it was him? I didn't tell you enough to narrow it down that much."

"His seafood *millefeuille* is famous."

Tsubaki's curt tone annoyed Ashizawa, but he reminded himself that Tsubaki was always like that and agreed.

Yanaginuma's seafood *millefeuille* was part of an original menu he'd created that had caused a huge sensation in the bubble years of the 1980s. French restaurants everywhere in Japan made their own reputations by imitating his menu, but no one ever matched the Grand Royale's seafood *millefeuille* for taste, form, sauce, or anything else.

Perhaps any French chef would have known about that, but when they'd been talking about food, Ashizawa hadn't been that aware of it.

"There are two reasons I hid the Grand Royale name from you. First, and I know you know this already Tsubaki-san, but the Grand Royale is one of a handful of *grande maisons* in Japan. Considering the influence it's had on others, I wouldn't be able to discuss the new project with anyone if the connection were known."

At this stage, one hand was more than enough to count the number of people who knew the rough outline of the project under discussion between them. They had operated in absolute secrecy.

"The other reason is that once you knew the name, it wouldn't exactly be shocking for you to eagerly sign onto the project just because of that."

"You think I'm as desperate as the rest of the world?"

"I didn't say that!" Ashizawa hurriedly denied it.

"So then why did you reveal it now? Did you think it would finally cure me of my reluctance?"

Tsubaki's words were as sharp as knives.

"Why do you assume these things? Didn't I already make it clear to you? It was your food and my reaction to it that attracted me and made me decide that I wanted to work with you." Ashizawa pleaded with Tsubaki, who continued to misunderstand him. He didn't want Tsubaki to get the wrong idea about his intentions or the kind of restaurant he was hoping to create with Yanaginuma.

"The reason I told you the name was because when Chef Yanaginuma found out that I was trying so hard to convince you, he said he had to make a show of good faith and reveal the truth because I felt so strongly about the matter."

"I will never have anything to do with the *grande maisons*," Tsubaki spat. Anger was rolling off of him in palpable waves.

"T—Tsubaki-san?"

"You say he's the head chef of the Grand Royale, but he's retired now. A chef who doesn't cook is just a chef. I'm an idiot for ever taking your offer seriously."

"How can you say that?!"

Ashizawa let everything else Tsubaki said slide, but he couldn't ignore that.

"Chef Yanaginuma is a wonderful man. He may not work out of a kitchen right now, but that's ignoring everything else he's done in his life. He trusts his staff and watches over their progress, but that's not all! He's trying to remain a part of the restaurant world by starting a new restaurant. What's so wrong about that? Is that a sham?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. I just think it's wrong to call someone who doesn't cook a *chef*," Tsubaki shouted back at Ashizawa's quick diatribe.

"But most of the food at the Grand Royale is an original creation of Chef Yanaginuma's. He's still encouraging the younger chefs, too. I feel I can call Chef Yanaginuma a chef with full confidence that he is among the greatest of his generation."

"The greatest of his generation, huh?" Tsubaki repeated his words with a cold smile. Ashizawa didn't understand what had upset Tsubaki so badly.

"Did you mention my name to Chef Yanaginuma?"

Tsubaki's voice was a challenge, released with a secretive laugh.

"I didn't mention it to anyone since you still hadn't agreed to anything."

"Then why don't you tell him? The magnificent chef of the Grand Royale, Shozo Yanaginuma." Tsubaki glared intensely at Ashizawa. "I think you'll discover that he doesn't want to work with me."

"But why not?"

It was plain from Tsubaki's tone how much he detested Yanaginuma. Ashizawa didn't understand the



cold, easy hatred of his remarks.

"How do you know that? You can't know until I tell him. Or is there some reason that you want Mister Yanaginuma to withdraw the offer instead of rejecting it yourself?"

"It's none of your business."

Ashizawa had only taken a stab in the dark, but Tsubaki laughed with a self-pitying smirk. It wasn't a denial or a confirmation. His face was completely closed. A shudder ran down Ashizawa's spine.

The color of Tsubaki's charming eyes deepened. The rich atmosphere that had surrounded this man since the very first moment Ashizawa had met him wavered slightly. Tsubaki reached toward Ashizawa.

Invisible chains closed around his arms and legs, holding his entire body. It felt strange.

Ashizawa felt his legs buckle under him, as if he were falling.

"How can you say it's none of my business?!"

He fought back the weakness in his legs and started shouting back.

"I wanted to understand you...and have you understand me. I worked hard for that. I refuse to lose everything I've worked for without knowing the reason why!" Everything he had built up these last three weeks would be destroyed. That's what Ashizawa feared.

He didn't know what was going on. But whatever it was, he needed to know.

"You want to know?" Tsubaki asked in a voice rich with an intense, quiet sweetness Ashizawa had never heard before. It made his heart tremble and sent a chill

through his entire body. The heady charm of Tsubaki's voice caused him to hesitate for a moment.

His fingers twitched and his mouth felt dry, but he knew that he couldn't run away from this.

"I want to know."

There was no trace of the peaceful man Ashizawa had been talking to only an hour before.

This was Tsubaki's violent rejection of Yanaginuma.

What was in this man's heart? Why was he refusing so stubbornly? It wasn't only Yanaginuma that he rejected. He was trying to reject Ashizawa as well.

Ashizawa didn't want that. No matter what it cost, he wanted to understand Tsubaki. And not just because of this job.

He wanted to know everything about the man.

An almost ferocious impulse motivated Ashizawa. A powerful desire had grown within him that even he didn't understand.

"Then come with me," Tsubaki said tonelessly. He shoved his hands into his coat pockets casually and started walking. Angered by the wide back Tsubaki turned on him, as if blocking him out, Ashizawa followed.

Chapter Seven

"Stop being so timid."

Tsubaki turned back to look at Ashizawa suspiciously after unlocking the door to his apartment.

"Come in."

"But...um..."

Ashizawa couldn't help but hang back.

Following after Tsubaki had led him to the man's apartment, near Individu. It was five minutes' walk from the restaurant, a single room on the third floor of an old apartment building.

"Don't make me repeat myself."

"Sorry."

At the annoyance in Tsubaki's voice, Ashizawa shook off his hesitation and hurried inside.

A few inches to his right were a gas hot plate and a sink. To the left was the bathroom. Against the far wall was a small refrigerator and, past a sliding door on the left, a room about one hundred square feet in size.

There was a rush of cold air and with it a familiar smell.

Cigarettes and—something else. But Tsubaki didn't use anything that smelled this strong in his cooking. So this must be his own scent.

There was a pair of pajamas carelessly thrown on his bed, which was pushed under the window.

This was a sudden invasion of his private life.

Ashizawa's heart ached at this raw view of the man. He realized the feelings he had for Tsubaki and wanted to run away. But he couldn't.

He pressed a hand against his chest and took a deep breath when he felt arms wrap around him from behind.

"Tsubaki-san—"

Tsubaki's chest pressed against Ashizawa's back and he heard Tsubaki's heart beating. It combined with the pulse that ran through his own body and rang loud in his ears.

Something soft and wet pressed against the back of Ashizawa's neck. Goosebumps sprang up on his skin. Ashizawa froze. It was as if Tsubaki had seen straight into his heart.

"Tsubaki-san!"

"Don't struggle."

His warm breath sent shivers down Ashizawa's spine. A large hand moved over Ashizawa's tensed body, trailing from shoulder to heart. The warmth of Tsubaki's hand and the movement of his fingers was more than a touch and Ashizawa's face tightened.

"Um, Tsubaki-san —"

"What?"

"What are you —"

"Do I really need to explain?"

Tsubaki's lips pressed against Ashizawa's neck again and searched moistly across his skin. The tender, obscene movement felt ticklish.

"You're the one who said you wanted to get to

know me better. Didn't you follow me here to find out everything?"

Unbuttoning Ashizawa's jacket, Tsubaki slipped it from his shoulders and slowly followed the lines of his body to the floor. And Tsubaki's fingers, which made such amazing food, slipped up under the hem of his sweater.

"But I didn't expect—"

"I won't let you say no." Tsubaki smirked.

It would be so much easier to blame this on the alcohol, but he hadn't drunk enough to cloud his judgment. How much easier it would have been if he'd been too drunk to take responsibility!

But Tsubaki's fingers were very real as they moved over his skin and Ashizawa's nerves ached in their wake.

"You can say I forced you, if you want. But I'm not going to stop now."

Tsubaki's fingers grasped Ashizawa's chin and turned his head to face him. His lips covered Ashizawa's with a biting intensity.

"Nngh!"

Tsubaki's tongue tangled violently with his. Ashizawa felt like he was trying to suck it out of his body. The more he tried to resist, the more fiercely Tsubaki held him.

"Mmph—mm!"

The heat of Tsubaki's hips pressing against him panicked Ashizawa. He could feel how hard he was, even through both of their clothes.

What was Tsubaki going to do to him? Bringing

him back to his apartment, grabbing him from behind, then forcing him to kiss him this wasn't an accident. Ashizawa had been hoping for it.

He clearly felt his desire and realized how serious this was. He'd wanted Tsubaki. Not just shallowly, but deep in his heart.

But fear made his body and his heart react differently.

He shrunk away from this new experience and Tsubaki's violent breathing.

Tsubaki seemed to feel Ashizawa pull away and he pressed his hips once more against him, drawing Ashizawa down with him. Ashizawa's thighs trembled, as if all the strength would seep out of his body. His groin began to ache in response to Tsubaki deliberately rubbing his hips against him.

This wasn't happening. Ashizawa's mind was in turmoil.

"Ah! T—Tsubaki-san—"

The movements of Tsubaki's squirming tongue, reeking of alcohol, grew more elaborate inside Ashizawa's mouth. The root of his tongue began to ache as it twisted again and again with Tsubaki's.

"Mmf—nng!"

Each time Tsubaki pulled away, saliva trailed from their lips, making a disgusting noise. Ashizawa's heart wavered between its fear and its desire for obscene pleasure. Tsubaki's heat, Tsubaki's kisses—a Tsubaki who Ashizawa didn't recognize was being revealed to him now.

"You want it," Tsubaki mocked, watching

Ashizawa try to follow his lips as he pulled away from him.

"No—"

"Oh, really?"

Without waiting for Ashizawa's denial, Tsubaki's lips seized him once again.

He sucked on Ashizawa's tongue as he easily lifted him up by the waist, and they fell together onto the bed.

"T—Tsubaki-san "

Tsubaki's hand started moving again beneath Ashizawa's sweater. A chill ran down his spine.

"Wait—"

Ashizawa pushed himself up on his elbows, but they couldn't bear the weight of Tsubaki on top of him and he sunk back into the mattress.

"You can't talk your way out of this."

Tsubaki's fingers found the tiny peaks on the flat expanse of Ashizawa's chest and pinched them. He looked up coyly at Ashizawa and Ashizawa detected not the slightest hint of love in his eyes.

What he felt was anger. But passion continued to grow inside his body, revealing the sensitive response of his body to Tsubaki's touch.

"Ah!"

"Have you had sex before?"

"—What?"

Ashizawa's spine tingled with the breathy question.

"Being a management consultant is a pretty flashy job. Good for getting women, I bet."

Tsubaki smiled sarcastically and reached down to Ashizawa's groin with his free hand. He covered the warm hardness beneath Ashizawa's clothes with his hand and squeezed.

"No!"

The sensation coursed up to Ashizawa's brain and he let out a cry. Tsubaki's lips closed over his, as if trying to swallow up his cries.

"Mmh!"

Tsubaki swallowed up even his most desperate gasps. He subjugated Ashizawa with the play of his tongue and began to stimulate his groin more forcefully.

"No!" Ashizawa cried in resistance.

Even if he was confused, he couldn't stand to let himself react to these intense sensations without a fight. Ashizawa writhed, trying to twist away. When he was touched, everything was exposed. Tsubaki could see just how much Ashizawa wanted him, just how shameful his feelings were.

He hadn't wanted Tsubaki only for a job. Behind his desire to understand Tsubaki was a lust that shamed him. He hadn't wanted Tsubaki to find out about it.

But Tsubaki wouldn't give him even that much. He pinned Ashizawa's hips with his knees.

"Do you think you can get away?" he asked with a laugh. His face was unlike anything Ashizawa had seen in him before. The man knew everything. He knew how much Ashizawa desired him, and in what way. And he was going to force Ashizawa to tell him.

"Stop, Tsubaki-san—please." Ashizawa begged, his voice shaking. "I did say that I wanted to get to know

you better—but not like this."

He crossed his arms in front of his face, fleeing Tsubaki's eyes.

It was a lie. A lie. A lie.

But no matter what he said, his body reacted honestly.

There was nothing he could do about it. He didn't want to see what was bubbling up inside him, this force that he couldn't keep down.

"Like what, then?"

Tsubaki pulled one of Ashizawa's hands away and shoved his face into Ashizawa's field of vision.

"How did you want to get to know me?"

Deep lines creased Tsubaki's forehead.

His eyes stared at him, unflinching, and Ashizawa began to feel guilty.

Tsubaki knew everything. He knew that part of Ashizawa that Ashizawa struggled to deny, but couldn't.

Ashizawa was scared of being touched. He was afraid of Tsubaki finding out his wildest emotions just by touching him.

The first time they'd met, Ashizawa had been surprised at how virile Tsubaki had been. His kiss had made him fall in love. Tsubaki had rejected Ashizawa's offer to work together and that was why he'd gotten so annoyed. Ashizawa hadn't wanted it to end like that.

He didn't want to let it end at all.

He had searched for a reason and used the project as an excuse, but it had always been to hide the truth in his heart from himself. In all his relationships, he had

never been as obsessed with anyone as he was now. He had never burned with this kind of desire.

Had Tsubaki seen into a part of his heart that Ashizawa hadn't even realized was there?

"You can't think of anything, can you?"

"Ah!"

Tsubaki licked the back of Ashizawa's hand. The rough sensation raised goosebumps all over his body.

"Just give up and I'll take you."

"Aaghh!" Ashizawa screamed with pain as Tsubaki squeezed the tip of his organ. He rolled that sensitive part of Ashizawa's body between his thumb and forefinger. Ashizawa heard a wet noise. His body began to quicken at the swelling, inescapable sensation.

It hurt, but whenever his fingers moved, Ashizawa's nerves reacted. He began to harden and release an even more obscene fluid.

Tsubaki efficiently stripped away the clothes in his way.

Ashizawa was ashamed as he felt Tsubaki's fingers getting wet. And, as if that weren't enough, he felt wet drops hit his thighs. This intense pleasure was erasing his control.

He was no longer himself.

"No! No, stop! Stop!"

"If you tell me you don't like it when I do that, I'm not going to believe you."

Tsubaki adjusted his position, laughing, and stretched his tongue out to Ashizawa's quivering flesh.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"Relax. I'll cook you lots of nice food."

His baritone whisper excited Ashizawa.

Between the feel of his breath, the cool glide of his teeth, and the stimulation of his tongue, Ashizawa felt himself going crazy.

"No matter what the ingredients, in the hands of a talented chef, everything becomes delicious. The preparation takes time, and you have to make things boil, or melt, or season them...then you arrange it all nicely on the plate, and —"

He flicked his tongue further down on Ashizawa's body.

"Start eating."

"Ah!"

The sensation of his rough tongue sent an electric jolt through Ashizawa's body.

He couldn't take any more, just imagining what was coming. Remembering the delicate movements of Tsubaki's fingers as he cooked, all the cells of Ashizawa's body hummed.

Tsubaki stripped the skin from his body and sucked the marrow out of his bones. That was what it felt like.

Ashizawa tried to contain his intense pleasure, but it was impossible. An ache radiated down to his toes and his body began to tremble slightly as heat built up in his groin.

"N—no! I'm—I'm—Tsubaki-san!"

His entire body throbbed.

Ashizawa couldn't believe how good this felt. Tears came to his eyes.

A fierce pulse began inside his veins, stealing away

every sensation in his body, rushing to escape him.

"Nn—ah!"

"Don't hold back. Trust me."

Tsubaki sucked on the tip with a smile.

"Aagh! I'm—!"

The sensation overwhelmed him and Ashizawa's mind went blank. All the strength left his body and he felt the heat bleed out of him and into Tsubaki's mouth. His body twitched and his hips leapt off the bed.

"Ah! Agh!"

Tsubaki drank up everything that Ashizawa gave him without any hesitation.

Ashizawa heard the sound of him gulping and felt an absurd shame come over him.

"That was quick." Tsubaki wiped his lips off unselfconsciously. "If you react that easily, you're going to be too far gone before you understand anything about me."

Tsubaki released Ashizawa's manhood and grinned slyly as he unbuckled the belt of his leather pants

"Tsubaki-san—"

Ashizawa was surprised at how hoarse his voice sounded.

"I told you not to run away."

Tsubaki's hand pushed against Ashizawa's shoulders, pressing him back into the bed as he tried to get up.

As the man's organ appeared from the opened fly of his pants, Ashizawa shivered and felt his mouth go dry.

"I'll cook you something really good. Just relax."



Tsubaki thrust his long fingers into his smiling mouth. Once he'd wet them thoroughly, he circled them around Ashizawa's waist, he slipped them between Ashizawa's thighs and further back, reaching for a place Ashizawa couldn't even imagine.

Ashizawa's hips jumped at the feeling of Tsubaki's fingertips pulling at the flesh back there.

"Relax," Tsubaki ordered. He forced his fingers inside.

"Nngh!"

"If you fight it, you're the only one who's going to get hurt."

Ashizawa could feel Tsubaki's fingers pushing inside, pulling the tight space open. There was pain, but something else, too. His voice was weak with the pleasure that came from this sensation.

"No—take them out—please!"

He wouldn't be able to control himself if this went on. He wouldn't know what he was saying anymore.

"That's why I told you—don't fight it."

Tsubaki held Ashizawa's struggling hips securely and forced his manhood inside Ashizawa to replace his fingers.

"Ah!"

The intense sensation exploded from the top of his skull.

Ashizawa gasped when Tsubaki's hands moved around to the front, trying to calm his tense body.

"Ow! Nngh! No!"

Even the slight movement of taking a breath immediately stimulated him from the place where their

bodies joined.

Ashizawa didn't know what to call this feeling: pain? soreness? In any case, it was something he had never felt before, filling his heart and body, taking control of him.

Tsubaki's shaft was inside him. He was connected to Tsubaki. That realization eroded everything else in his mind.

"Stop! No! Aagh! Please—please!"

Ashizawa begged desperately, pointlessly. Even if he resisted, he couldn't free himself and there was nothing he could do about his open legs, where he was being penetrated.

"I thought you wanted to know all about me?"

I do. I do want to know. But—but this...

Tsubaki grasped Ashizawa's chin as he flailed his head from side to side and peered into his face.

"No—"

Tsubaki leaned over him and his position inside Ashizawa's body changed as well. Ashizawa felt his muscles clamp down around Tsubaki. He had no control over his own body. As shuddering waves of sensation poured through him, he clung to the man's swelling desire. His spine twitched minutely and he lost his grip on reality.

"Can you feel me inside you?"

He patted Ashizawa's cheek lightly and Ashizawa opened his tightly-shut eyes.

"It's so warm inside you I might lose it first."

"Wh—What—nngh!"

The heavy pressure made him twitch. Trapped

between their bellies, Ashizawa's organ was growing hard again despite his recent climax. Eager fluid dripped from its tip.

"I wanted to drive you crazy and then...eat you up, but...it looks like you're going to eat me instead."

"Nngh!"

Tsubaki laughed, thrusting in even deeper. The movement sent an obscene sensation through Ashizawa's body as Tsubaki's flesh rolled back and forth over a part of Ashizawa that had never been touched before. He felt himself melting in excitement.

"N—no! Please! Stop, Tsubaki-san!"

Much deeper than the pain, Ashizawa's hips ached with an almost shameful sensation.

It was a ticklish feeling, as if hundreds of insects were skittering over his body. He curled his toes against the sensation. His organ was reacting quickly, pulsing excitedly. He could no longer think.

"You're too tight—" Tsubaki said, his voice strained. Ashizawa could feel him move inside his body.

"No! Take it out! Tsubaki-san, please!"

Each time he moved, Ashizawa's body reacted. Drunk on his own pleasure, he no longer knew what was happening.

"You're the one holding onto me," Tsubaki gasped, remarking on the embarrassing reaction of Ashizawa's body. Another shudder ran through him.

"Ah! No—no! Don't move!" Ashizawa cried desperately, but it had no effect.

The movement of Tsubaki's hips had grown

franzied and it carried Ashizawa along with it. He couldn't speak. His lower body trembled, fluid oozing out of him, as the sensation built and built. Completely unaware of what was happening to him, Ashizawa's eyes fluttered open and lit on Tsubaki's face.

Tsubaki's pained expression seemed to be reaching out for something to hold onto. It made Ashizawa's heart ache.

Why was this man, who had overpowered Ashizawa's body and done whatever he pleased with it, looking at him as though he were going to cry? Ashizawa had wanted to know everything about him, but he understood nothing.

He wanted to ask why, but that was the one thing Tsubaki wouldn't let him do. Clinging to the pleasure Tsubaki gave him, riding it—all Ashizawa had discovered was his own instincts.

"Aaagh!"

Tsubaki's powerful thrusts pushed Ashizawa's body further. He clung to Tsubaki, trying to follow with all of his might so he wouldn't be left behind. Pleasure and pain swirled together, swallowing up Ashizawa's consciousness.

"Nn—nghaah!"

His scream carried him through the climax, thrown up to the heavens. And as he fell, suddenly Tsubaki released his passion into the tight flesh of Ashizawa's body that surrounded him.

"Ah—"

At the sound of his almost-pained gasp, Ashizawa's body trembled once more. He was completely powerless,

unable to move his fingers or toes. He had left his mind somewhere far behind.

He wanted to move his arms, but he couldn't. He wanted to speak, but his tongue lay inert.

"Ashizawa..."

He couldn't even react to the gentle caress he felt on his cheek.

Even when Tsubaki's passion grew again as he kissed away the tears Ashizawa didn't remember crying, he couldn't do anything in return. But that part of Tsubaki that remained buried inside him twitched and grew hard for a second time, and Ashizawa reacted.

"Don't worry."

A gentle kiss fell on Ashizawa's half-open lips, quick, consuming.

"I'll make the best food I know how and you can have it all."

Tsubaki's low voice tickled Ashizawa's earlobe and he shivered.

The power of the man's arms as they clung to him made his chest feel tight.

Once Tsubaki had feasted on him, what would be left?

He no longer knew what he'd been looking for, or what Tsubaki had wanted from him.

What could Ashizawa do but hug his knees to his chest and take in his new master again and again, crying out wordlessly?

Chapter Eight

"Ashizawa-san, there's a call on line three."

"Thanks."

Ashizawa picked up the transferred call.

"Thank you for holding. This is Ashizawa."

"It's me, Masaki."

He heard Yanaginuma's voice. Ashizawa adjusted his behavior for this new situation.

"H—hello sir. I've been meaning to call you."

"Your father told me you're back at work. I thought maybe you'd reached a decision about our project. Have you?"

His voice was full of hope. Ashizawa's heart sank. "Well..."

"I'd like to meet as soon as you're available. If you're too busy, I was thinking I could go to our chef's restaurant to try his food myself, but—Masaki?"

Yanaginuma had noticed Ashizawa's silence. He was a perceptive man.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well—"

"No, wait. You're at the office now, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have plans today? Are you staying at work all day?"

"I'd been planning to," Ashizawa answered

timidly, picking up a fax that had just come in.

"Would you mind meeting face to face to discuss this? If you have time."

"But I'm sure you're very busy, Yanaginuma-san."

"Nothing more important than this project."

They arranged to meet at a Japanese restaurant in the same building as A&6. Ashizawa felt terrible.

"What am I going to do?"

Ashizawa had been asking himself that for a long time. He didn't know how to explain all this.

When he remembered what happened on Wednesday night, he froze.

He still didn't understand how things had gotten to that point. But the evidence of it that lingered on his flesh and in his mind made him want to die.

A shudder welled up from the core of his body and his shame reawakened in the same moment, making Ashizawa stiffen.

How many times had he thought it was a dream? He didn't even remember how he'd gotten home. But when he'd awakened the next morning, the dull pain he felt and the traces of their activities on his body told him that what happened between him and Tsubaki had been real.

He told himself that it was awful, but his heart hadn't allowed him to flee. No, the reality was different. Tsubaki had seen through to Ashizawa's heart and his desire for him from the very beginning.

Ashizawa had spent all of Thursday in regret and on Friday he decided not to go to the restaurant. Instead,

he stayed at the office with his cell phone off. He knew this wouldn't accomplish anything, but he couldn't change what he was doing.

When seven o'clock rolled around, Ashizawa was flustered despite himself and didn't know how to act when he went to the restaurant.

Yanaginuma arrived five minutes late.

"Good evening."

Ashizawa stood up quickly and bowed.

"Have you eaten yet? Let's get the winter menu. With some Hakkaisan saké."

Yanaginuma gave his order to the waiter, then brought a cigarette to his lips. He looked calm and composed. When he lowered his eyes, Ashizawa noticed something about his face—something familiar.

"So are you going to tell me what's going on?" Yanaginuma came immediately to the point Ashizawa pushed himself up from his cushion on the floor, put both hands on the floor, and bowed his head.

"I'm very sorry."

"What? Why?"

"When I gave the chef your name, I thought we would begin to talk in more detail, but somehow we misunderstood each other and he refused to listen to me any longer."

"By which you mean he didn't give you the answer we've been hoping for?"

"Yes, sir."

To be honest, Tsubaki had outright refused it. But even now, Ashizawa wasn't giving up.

"You told him who I was?"

"Yes, sir."

"And how did he react?"

"Well—"

"Just be honest with me and tell me what he said. I've been in this business a long time. I know not everyone is a fan of mine."

Ashizawa had stumbled to a halt, but Yanaginuma got ahead of him with a chuckle.

"Did he say he hates my restaurant?"

"He seems to have some opinions about the *grande maisons*, but I thought I could talk him out of those. But he..."

"He what?"

They swallowed the saké that had been brought out for them and Ashizawa struggled for several moments before beginning again.

"He told me that if you knew his name, you would refuse to work with him."

"I would?"

Yanaginuma looked confused, as Ashizawa had expected he would. Feeling incredibly uncomfortable, Ashizawa bowed again.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I expressed myself very well to him. If I could only explain the offer a little better, I think he would relax and hear me out."

Until the mention of Yanaginuma's name, Tsubaki had listened to Ashizawa's offer cheerfully. Maybe Ashizawa had crossed some sort of line without realizing it. Just like the first time they'd talked, he seemed to have insulted Tsubaki somehow. But he couldn't imagine how. Even when they'd slept together,

Ashizawa couldn't see what Tsubaki kept in his heart.

"Masaki, get up. We can't talk with you down on the ground like that."

"I'm sorry. I need to talk to him again. If there was a misunderstanding, I can clear it up and we can start negotiations to reach a final decision."

"If that's what you think you have to do, I won't stop you. Whoever this chef is, I trust you completely to make the right choice."

Yanaginuma's kind words thudded heavily into Ashizawa's heart.

"It's not as if we have a tight schedule, and I don't want to stumble. Choosing good people is critical for the success of a restaurant. I don't want to rush this and then have everything else fall apart."

Ashizawa didn't know how to answer Yanaginuma's generosity, so he simply hung his head and nodded.

Until today, he had worked hard alongside Tsubaki. He didn't want to just give up now.

"But could you at least tell me the chef's name and the name of his restaurant?"

"But..."

"Remember what he told you: he said that if I heard his name, I would refuse to work with him. That means we must know each other already, right? So if I find out who he is, I can work toward reconciliation once he agrees to your offer."

"But what if it stirs up bad memories?"

"Well, if we finalized a contract before I found out about it, and then I really did refuse to work with him,

that wouldn't be good, would it? Do you disagree?"

Ashizawa wanted to tell Yanaginuma that he would never do that, but remembering the way Tsubaki had acted, maybe Yanaginuma was right.

Ashizawa looked down at his hands, tightly interlocked in his lap, and wondered for a moment whether or not to tell. But in the end, he decided that if the two were going to work together, he simply had to.

"The restaurant is called Individu."

"Individu? I don't think I've ever heard of it. And the chef?"

"Tsubaki. Shuichiro Tsubaki."

"Shuichiro Tsubaki?"

Ashizawa could see Yanaginuma's expression changing.

"And his age? Do you have any idea how old he is?"

He'd put his hands on the table and leaned forward across the table. This strange behavior surprised Ashizawa, but he answered anyway.

"Not exactly. I think he's in his mid-thirties."

"This is amazing."

Yanaginuma covered his head with his hands and fell back onto his cushion. He was acting very strangely. Ashizawa wondered what was going on.

"Yanaginuma-san?"

"Did he... did he tell you anything else? Like why he thought I would refuse?"

"No." Ashizawa shook his head. "He didn't say anything more."

Ashizawa had wondered why Tsubaki had said

that. He wanted to understand him and so he'd followed him back to his apartment. But all he'd found out was how warm Tsubaki's skin was and how passionate his body could be.

He had told him nothing else. Maybe he'd never intended to. Ashizawa remembered how lonely he'd felt when he'd woken up without Tsubaki there, and he felt his chest tighten.

"He didn't tell me anything."

"I see."

Yanaginuma nodded silently and slowly lifted his head from his hands. He took a deep breath and picked up his saké cup.

"Chef—"

Ashizawa picked up the bottle of saké and Yanaginuma held his cup out to him. He watched the saké tumble out of the bottle as he quietly said, "Shuichiro is my son."

"What—?"

Ashizawa's hands shook, spilling saké on the table.

"I—I'm sorry."

Ashizawa hurried to wipe it up and Yanaginuma went on.

"I'm sorry I surprised you."

"N—not at all. But, I'm sorry—what were you saying?"

Ashizawa knew that Yanaginuma had a child and that he had remarried. But he had never known his son was that old.

"Shuichiro is my son with my first wife."

"The one who was ill?"

"Yes."

Yanaginuma stared at the saké cup in his hand.

"Why Tsubaki?"

"My wife's maiden name."

Ashizawa didn't know how to react.

"I didn't know," he whispered.

"I'm sure," Yanaginuma said with a frail smile.

"Very few of my colleagues even know this. After my wife passed away, Shuichiro went to live with her parents. We've never truly been father and son to each other."

Yanaginuma almost sounded as if he were talking about someone else. Ashizawa's heart squeezed tight.

"Did you know your son had become a chef?"

"I knew that he studied in France after he made it through culinary school. I also heard rumors that he'd opened a restaurant somewhere after he came back to Japan, but that was all."

Yanaginuma's face was a mask; Ashizawa couldn't tell how he felt about any of this.

Why hadn't they lived together? Why did Tsubaki hate Yanaginuma, his own father, so much? They were tied by blood. Ashizawa couldn't understand it.

Maybe he didn't want to talk about it because it was so personal. Ashizawa watched Yanaginuma, lost.

"Can I ask what happened between the two of you?"

"Yes, it's probably better if you know."

Yanaginuma asked for another bottle of saké and set down his chopsticks, picking up a cigarette instead.

"When I was twenty-six, I opened the Restaurant Royale, the predecessor of the Grand Royale. And when I was thirty, I had a child with a woman who had come to learn to be a chef."

That made him almost the same age as Tsubaki was now.

"I mentioned before how I was very zealous in my youth and that I cared more about having a bigger, more famous restaurant than anything else in the world."

Yanaginuma sipped silently at his saké as he revealed his life to Ashizawa.

"I never thought about my family. I spent all day, every day, thinking about my restaurant. I never took a break, and I only spent the briefest of moments with my son Shuichiro."

In Yanaginuma's eyes, Ashizawa could detect the slightest trace of embarrassment. He had never once noticed the resemblance between Yanaginuma and Tsubaki before. But now, listening to this story, he could see many things that they had in common. Of course their features, but even their voices seemed somehow similar—though that may have been only his imagination.

"When my wife became ill, I was distant. That's not to say I wasn't concerned. But I just told myself that everything would be all right. I underestimated the situation. My wife understood that I was busy with the restaurant and didn't want to worry me—but then she died. Shuichiro watched his mother waste away and I'm sure he resents how cold his father was to her at the end."

As he listened to Yanaginuma's story, Ashizawa tried to imagine what it had been like for Tsubaki. What had it been like for him to have a father who didn't care about his family and a mother who was so weak?

"But if he resented you, why would he do the same work you do?"

"That I don't know. The only thing I can think of is that he wanted to get back at me."

Ashizawa thought over what Yanaginuma had said.

If Tsubaki truly resented his father, would he have followed the same path in life? If his desire for revenge were turned inside out, would he want to rewrite history by living in the same world?

All Ashizawa had were guesses. But considering Individu, Ashizawa couldn't believe Tsubaki had done it all out of spite. If he had, he wouldn't make such kind-hearted food and his restaurant wouldn't exude such a sense of affection.

Suddenly, Shibata's words came to mind.

He's just an awkward guy. There's a part of him that only knows how to express his feelings through his food. He might have made you feel bad, but he's not a bad guy. Try to forgive him.

Now that he'd heard Yanaginuma's story, Ashizawa understood what Shibata had been trying to tell him.

Tsubaki's kindness, his love for his restaurant, his love for others—it had all enriched Ashizawa's feelings through Tsubaki's food. Even the first time he'd tasted it, the food had seemed somehow familiar and he'd been

desperate to work with him.

Ashizawa had wanted to tell Tsubaki how he felt, and Tsubaki, who had never come out into the restaurant before, had come out for Ashizawa.

Now he understood the importance of that.

For Tsubaki, Ashizawa was someone who understood the emotions he put into his food.

How must he have felt when he found out that this person was working with Yanaginuma, the man he hated?

But for Ashizawa, the fact that they were father and son would resolve the contradiction in their hearts. The significance of Tsubaki being the only person Ashizawa wanted—it was because some fundamental similarity underlay both men's cooking.

Of course, it wasn't the taste of Yanaginuma at his peak; but the taste and the staff he was seeking for his new restaurant might very well be exactly what his son was trying to accomplish now.

"When I remarried, I had another child. I experienced the love of that family and finally I understood what a horrible thing I'd done to my dead wife and Shuichiro."

Yanaginuma's hand trembled slightly as he lifted his saké cup.

"I'm afraid it's too late, and I'm sure even if I apologized he wouldn't listen. I can't ask him to forgive me. But, for whatever reason, knowing that Shuichiro is following in my footsteps makes me happy. It feels almost like fate that the chef you would find for my project would be Shuichiro."

"Yanaginuma-san—"

"After Shuichiro came back to Japan, I thought about looking for him. But I was afraid. Afraid that Shuichiro would blame me, or that I would be accused for my past crimes. I knew how heavy my sins were, and I was afraid. Even knowing that he would probably reject me didn't make it any easier to actually be rejected. And if he was working as a chef, my name would only cause him problems."

He shook his head slightly.

"But those are all excuses. I ran away from reality. I always have."

Yanaginuma had laid his past painfully bare.

"I know how selfish I was. I don't think I have a right to see Shuichiro anymore. But if Shuichiro can separate this offer from our family's problems, I wouldn't be opposed to hiring him as the chef of my new restaurant. I think I made the right choice in trusting you, Masaki. And I think you picked the right person for the job."

Yanaginuma's eyes were slightly moist as he said all this. Ashizawa was sure that a cacophony of memories had been stirred up inside him.

"Please—maybe this is too much to ask. But I'm asking because it's you. Once more just once more, please go talk to Shuichiro and tell him how I feel."

Yanaginuma clutched Ashizawa's hands.

"Tell him that I'm proud to know he's working in the same world I once inhabited."

After his meeting with Yanaginuma, Ashizawa wandered the city, neither in the mood to go back to work nor to go home. He felt as if Yanaginuma's story gave him a more complete picture of Tsubaki as a person, which he hadn't understood until now.

He couldn't explain concretely what that picture looked like, but he could see "Shuichiro Tsubaki" clearly in his heart.

And he thought he now understood the reason for the pained face Tsubaki had made when they'd slept together.

Unlike Tsubaki, Ashizawa had grown up in a loving family environment.

Like Yanaginuma, Ashizawa's father had been busy with work, and Ashizawa definitely couldn't say that they had spent a lot of time together. But in the small amount of time they did spend together, his father had showered Ashizawa with affection and he had understood that his father loved him.

Ashizawa respected him and wanted to be like him, and so now he had followed in his father's footsteps.

Of course, they were two different people, and Ashizawa didn't know everything about his father. They had great differences of opinion and even argued with each other. But since they respected each other, they'd come through everything together. That was probably because his father was honest, didn't hide things, and treated even children with respect.

So Ashizawa couldn't say that he understood all the complex emotions that Tsubaki must feel towards his father. It would be a lie to say he did.

But there was something that Ashizawa did understand.

If Tsubaki truly hated his father, he never would have been able to make the food that he did. He never would have followed in his footsteps.

The more Ashizawa thought about it, the poignancy of it all touched him and made his eyes fill with tears.

Tsubaki-san...

The food Tsubaki made was gentle.

His restaurant and all the people he'd gathered there gave off an aura of kindness.

Ashizawa was sure that the kind of restaurant Tsubaki wanted to create was very similar to the kind Yanaginuma wanted. Ashizawa was also sure the food and atmosphere Tsubaki sought were completely different from those of the father he had hated and resented.

The result was that it overlapped with Yanaginuma's new dream, born of his regret for the past.

Tsubaki was stubborn, obstinate, and awkward. And of course Ashizawa couldn't forgive him for everything he'd done that night. But he knew that since he could have run away and he didn't, it wasn't entirely Tsubaki's fault.

That was something he'd understood after sleeping with Tsubaki.

The feelings he had for the man weren't simply an obsession born of his work. He had tried to convince himself of that; but even if it hadn't been his intent,

sleeping with Tsubaki, being penetrated, feeling the warmth of his body had made Ashizawa realize his feelings.

But now he didn't know what to do.

He knew he had to talk to him again, but he had no idea what to say.

Still, without realizing it, his steps had carried him to Individu.

Since it was a Friday, the street was busy, which made the light from Individu seem more welcoming.

"They're probably mad at me."

At first he had planned to help at the restaurant for a month, but they'd never said what his last day of work would be. But there was no question that this, the fourth week, was to be the last week.

When Ashizawa arrived, Masatsuka and Takagi were scheduled to manage the floor together. He hadn't had that much effect on their jobs. But still, not showing up for work would naturally leave them in a bind. He was surprised at his own irresponsibility.

But in any case, he had to wrap this up.

Ashizawa steeled himself and tried to peer in the windows through the decorative framing. But he pulled back when he saw customers at the closest table.

And they weren't alone: all the tables were full.

"It's payday and a Friday—of course it's crowded."

Ashizawa rested a hand over his wildly beating heart and breathed deeply for a few moments to calm himself down. He found it a bit odd that a part of him could analyze the situation so calmly.

He couldn't wait outside the restaurant, so he decided to wait at the coffee shop near the station. As he began walking away, he heard the door of the restaurant open.

"Ashizawa-san!"

"Y—yes?"

Ashizawa turned around reflexively and saw Takagi.

"Oh, Takagi-kun. Hello."

Ashizawa couldn't make his face do what he wanted and he gave a strained smile.

"About not showing up for work —um—"

"Masatsuka-san! Ashizawa-san's come after all!"

Not paying attention to Ashizawa, Takagi shouted back into the restaurant. A moment later, Masatsuka's face appeared in the doorway beside Takagi.

"Hello, Masatsuka-san."

"No time for that now. Are you free tonight?" Masatsuka asked peremptorily.

"Uh, right now?"

"Quickly!"

"Yes, I have some time, but—hey!"

Before he could explain himself, Masatsuka and Takagi grabbed Ashizawa's arms and dragged him into the restaurant.

"Masatsuka-san—"

"Save it for later. For now, get changed, then please come back out and help us."

All the customers' eyes were on Ashizawa as he was dragged into the back room.

"But Tsubaki-san—"

"I don't care what that stubborn old chef says. I'm in charge of the floor. I have to put the customers first. Clear?"

"Masatsuka-san—"

"Is that clear?"

"Y—yes, sir."

"Good. Get changed and be out on the floor in ten—no, make it five minutes. Thanks."

The door slammed shut.

"Uh—yeah."

Ashizawa hadn't really processed what was going on, but left alone in the back room, he started changing anyway.

He put on a laundered white shirt, a black vest, and then his *tablier*. The *tablier* that had given him so much trouble when he first started he now tied with a flourish. He checked himself in the mirror and wondered if he really looked all right. Would Tsubaki be upset that he'd come to help? Would he be able to work once he saw Tsubaki's face?

A sudden memory of Tsubaki's warmth reawakened in his mind. His warm breath, whispering Ashizawa's name against his ear.

The memory made his fingers tremble and his heart beat faster.

"Ashizawa-san! Are you dressed yet?" Takagi called eagerly from outside the door.

"Uh, yes—I'm coming."

He leaned his back against the door before Takagi could open it. He put his hand over his heart and took a deep breath.

The sounds of brisk, cheerful activity outside pulled Ashizawa back to reality.

He would do his best, he decided, and opened the door.

"What do you need me to do, Masatsuka-san?"

"Get the order for table three."

Masatsuka pointed, a bottle of wine in his other hand.

"We're not closing the kitchen tonight. The special is roasted rabbit stuffed with herbs."

"All right."

Masatsuka smiled and nodded at Ashizawa.

There was a couple in their thirties at table three.

When Ashizawa came to take their order, the man ordered with a practiced air, as if he did this all the time. He ordered appetizers, soup, fish, and then asked what the special was.

"If you don't mind wild game, today's special is herb-stuffed roast rabbit with vegetables."

"We'll have that, then."

Ashizawa took their order to the kitchen.

"New order!"

"Huh?"

Shibata looked up when he heard Ashizawa's voice.

"Ashizawa! Where were you? They said you were off today." He looked Ashizawa up and down, a pan in one hand.

"Oh, yeah..."

Ashizawa could see Tsubaki behind Shibata. He continued working in silence, never once turning around.

"Whatever. I'm glad you came. Here."

He waved Ashizawa over and Ashizawa leaned over the counter curiously. Shibata tossed a roll into his mouth.

"Mmph!"

"It's a new recipe. It's onion and garlic cheese bread. That's sort of a mouthful, but it tastes all right, huh?"

Shibata grinned.

The slight aroma of onion spread through Ashizawa's mouth with the sweet taste of cheese.

"It's greaaah!"

"Glad to hear it. Its other name is 'pick-me-up' bread. I made a lot, so if there's any left over you can take some home with you."

"Thank you."

That was Shibata's way of being kind. Ashizawa gave him a toothy grin as thanks.

He had more to do than just take care of one table. Ashizawa hurried around the floor helping to serve wine, busing dishes, and bringing out fresh silverware. As soon as one group left, another group came in. They were busier than any Friday before and there was no time for Ashizawa to think about anything else.

If he'd been alone he would have panicked, but with Masatsuka's helpful directions and Takagi's example to follow, Ashizawa managed to serve people. The three of them seemed to move and even breathe in sync. He knew what people would need next and his orders to the kitchen became smoother.

The restaurant was filled with warmth that night

and Ashizawa felt himself relaxing into that ambiance.

"Thanks a lot."

Masatsuka appeared beside Ashizawa as he waited at the counter for an order.

"You can go."

"It's that late already?" He realized it was after eleven.

"Takagi and I can cover it from here, so go ahead into the kitchen. Shibata-san, is there something for Ashizawa-san to eat?"

"What'll it be? I'll make you anything you want today."

They were so busy with the regular customers, but Shibata's voice was cheerful as he offered to do even more. It tempted Ashizawa and he peered into the kitchen, but Tsubaki's back was still turned.

If he went in now, he wouldn't be able to talk to Tsubaki.

"I want to help a little longer."

"Ashizawa?"

"I didn't tell you I was coming late and that caused all kinds of trouble, so I want to make it up to you. I'll keep working till we close."

"We're grateful to have your help, of course, but—are you sure?"

"If he says he wants to do it, just let him do it."

The voice that came out of the kitchen made Ashizawa tremble. Tsubaki turned around.

Ashizawa had felt like Tsubaki had been ignoring him ever since he'd come to the restaurant today. But he hadn't been. Now, Tsubaki was looking at him.

"If Chef says it's okay, then who are we to argue? Go ahead."

Masatsuka clapped Ashizawa on the shoulder.

"Then can I quit early instead of him?" asked Takagi.

"Quit playing around. Weren't you the one who said you wanted to work extra hours to make more money? Go on, get to work."

"Masatsuka-san, I think you treat Ashizawa-san differently than you treat me."

"Of course I do. Oh, can you bring up some champagne from the cellar? The fridge is empty."

"Are you serious?!" Takagi looked genuinely unhappy.

"Yes, I'm...*serious*. Come on now. You're too young to be standing still. Get to work."

Masatsuka smacked Takagi on the backside and Takagi hurried down the stairs that led to the cellar.

"You shouldn't be standing around either, Ashizawa-san. Go check on the customers."

"Right."

Ashizawa went back to the floor with light steps. The first table whose order he'd taken had just finished their main course.

"Will there be anything else?"

"We'd like cheese, but we finished our wine."

The bottle of red wine they'd ordered for the main course had been reduced to a single mouthful in one glass.

"Can I interest you in some after dinner drinks?"

"What do you recommend?"

"Sauternes or port wine. I recommend the Sauternes, a 1986 Chateau de Rayne-Vigneau. It has comparable reviews with d'Yquem and it has a concentrated, elegant taste. It tastes similar to pears or pineapples, and goes quite well with a Roquefort or other blue cheese."

"I love blue cheese!"

The woman's face brightened.

"I'm not much of a fan myself... I'd like something to go with a washed variety."

Washed cheeses were so named because there were microorganisms attached to their surfaces which were washed away by wine, brandy, or salt as they ripened. They were particularly noted for their rich body and flavor.

"I would recommend a red wine with body at the minimum, but it could also be good with a Calvados." That was a type of brandy made from apples in Normandy, in the north of France. "We have an excellent washed cheese from Normandy. Would you like to try it?"

"Absolutely."

Ashizawa prepared their drinks, then set their cheeses on platters and carried them to their table. Besides the cheeses they'd ordered, he also included a Camembert and a ricotta, serving each in bite-size slices.

Ashizawa had first begun to appreciate cheese in high school. Before that, he'd never had anything but processed cheese and never thought it was particularly good.

The first time he went to the Grand Royale, he

couldn't understand why his father and Yanaginuma got so excited about their wine and cheese. But when he actually tried it, his eyes were opened.

The two men had recommended wines and cheeses to him when he was younger and watched his reactions with amusement. The smell admittedly bothered him a little. But the smooth texture and taste of cheese on his tongue was an indescribable experience.

"It's called the 'marriage.'"

The union of a good wine with the proper dish that could highlight individual flavors was compared to a marriage in French cooking, whether between wine and food, or wine and cheese.

Each element was perfectly delicious on its own, but when eaten with the best union possible, the depth of the flavor could be enhanced.

The saltiness of a blue cheese like Roquefort, combined with the honey-like sweetness or the tartness of certain wines created a magnificent flavor.

Until now, Ashizawa had only been concerned with absolutes in his work: win or lose, profit or loss. But when the two were mixed, one hundred or two hundred results might easily spring up, he realized now.

It wasn't a question of eat or be eaten, but instead, compensating for each other's weaknesses and—together—creating something new. He suspected that that philosophy could reconcile even Tsubaki and Yanaginuma.

"All done!"

After the last customer had left, Takagi closed the door and let out a cry of celebration.

"I'm so beat! I mean, what was that tonight?"

"Christmas or Valentine's Day I can understand, but this is just a regular Friday night. Even if it is payday, that was incredible."

Shibata stretched his neck from side to side as he came out of the kitchen and set a basket full of bread on the table.

"Here, Ashizawa. Eat something. You must be hungry."

"There's an open bottle of wine left. Could we use that too, Chef?"

"Might as well get the cheese out, then."

"Hurray!" Takagi shouted in glee at Tsubaki's grouchy concession, and went to get the cheese.

"Do you always do this when you close up? It seems odd."

"Today is special."

Masatsuka set enough glasses on the table for everyone and poured wine into each of them. Ashizawa took off his *tablier* and sat down.

"Why?"

"It's not much, but we wanted to give you a little 'thank you' party."

"What?" Ashizawa asked, surprised

"If you'd called it quits at eleven, we would have had to postpone it, but you stayed. Okay, sit down, guest-of-honor-san. Shibata-san, do you have the thing I asked you for?"

"Already?"

Shibata started to stand up, but Tsubaki put a hand on his shoulder and went into the kitchen. When he came back, he was carrying a chocolate cake decorated with fresh cream.

"Oh—"

The words "Thanks, Ashizawa" were written on top.

"We rushed it, so it doesn't look very good, but—well, our gratitude still comes through."

Everyone looked at Ashizawa: Tsubaki expressionlessly, Shibata with a big grin, and Masatsuka and Takagi kindly.

"Thank you for working so hard. We really appreciated having you with us." Masatsuka bowed. "To be honest, I didn't expect anything. I thought you were all talk. But I was wrong. I was just jerking Chef Tsubaki's chain. But now, if you didn't have your consulting job, I'd be ready to recruit you as a real staff member."

"What?" Takagi asked, confused, his mouth full of bread. "You mean Ashizawa-san isn't really part of the staff?"

There was a moment's silence, then Masatsuka smacked Takagi on the back of the head.

"Ow! What'd you do that for, Masatsuka-san?"

"Because you sound like an idiot. Honestly, you're hopeless. But all joking aside—isn't there something you'd like to say, Tsubaki-san? With all the staff here, if you don't mind?"

"Masatsuka."

Standing a slight distance away, his arms folded

across his chest, Tsubaki glared at Masatsuka.

"If we left the decision-making up to Tsubaki, nothing would ever get done. Don't you think you ought to at least hear him out on his offer?" Ashizawa took what you told him to heart and he met your challenge. Isn't that right?"

I'll do my best to get to know the restaurant and the rest of the staff. And you, Chef, Ashizawa had vowed at the very beginning.

Shibata picked up the debate from Masatsuka.

"Now we understand Ashizawa's personality. And he worked hard to get to know you, naturally, since you're the chef. But he understands the restaurant and the rest of us, too. You need to recognize that, Tsubaki."

"Even if Yanaginuma is the backer?"

Tsubaki pressed a hand against his forehead as he spoke the name hatefully.

"You mean Shozo Yanaginuma? From the Grand Royale?"

"That's right."

Ashizawa answered Shibata's question. When he did, Shibata's tense expression spread to Masatsuka. Then Ashizawa understood. Everyone on the staff of Individu, maybe even Takagi, knew about Tsubaki's relationship to Yanaginuma.

"Tsubaki-san..."

Ashizawa took a quick breath, then called to the chef gently. Tsubaki slowly turned to look at Ashizawa. The pain in his face made Ashizawa's heart ache, but he said what he needed to say anyway. "I met with Chef Yanaginuma today and told him about you."

In that instant, Tsubaki's body shook visibly. Ashizawa understood now how great an effect Yanaginuma had had on Tsubaki's life. That made it even more necessary to tell Tsubaki everything.

"Chef Yanaginuma asked me to tell you something. He said that he's proud to know you're working in the same world he once inhabited."

"Liar." Tsubaki rejected that with a hiss. "He would never say something like that."

His reaction was so childlike that Ashizawa's heart was stung.

"It's not a lie. I told him about you and that's what he said. I think he's been worried about you for a very long time."

"Then why didn't he ever try to contact me, even once? He had enough influence to find me if he wanted to," Tsubaki yelled.

"He said he was afraid." Ashizawa replied, trying to comfort him.

"Afraid? Of what?"

Tsubaki's voice was harsh as he stared Ashizawa in the face. His expression pierced Ashizawa's heart. It hurt, and he couldn't do anything about it.

"Of being rejected by his son—by you, Tsubaki-san."

Tsubaki blinked.

"He doesn't think you'll ever forgive him, even though he regrets the past and wants to apologize to you. He was afraid of facing you and being rejected."

Tsubaki's lips trembled. Finally he flung his arm out and knocked a vase to the floor with a loud crash.

"Chef!"

"Don't come near me!"

Bright red blood dripped from Tsubaki's hand. It looked like his heart was crying. He had been hurt so very, very badly. He had been afraid.

"Does he expect me to believe such an obvious lie after all this time? What was he...so...afraid of?"

Seeing Tsubaki begin to crumble, Ashizawa jumped to his feet.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"Don't look at me! Nobody look at me!"

Tsubaki covered his face with his hands. He fell to his knees, struggling to hold back his pained cries. He looked exactly like a little child.

The sight of him weeping so bitterly closed like a clawed fist around Ashizawa's heart. He had no idea the man had been hiding such pain. How could Ashizawa save him? Could he ease the agony he'd borne in his life?

As Ashizawa stood frozen, Masatsuka tapped him lightly on the shoulder. Then Shibata, then Takagi—they all gave him a last smile and went out of the restaurant.

"Oh—"

As Shibata was on his way out the door, he turned around and put a finger to his lips. Ashizawa couldn't stop them. All he could do was watch them leave.

The sound of the door shutting reverberated loudly in the restaurant.

The two of them were alone now.

Tsubaki hugged his knees, the cut on the back of his hand aching.

Ashizawa approached him hesitantly, careful to avoid the shards of glass.

"Tsubaki-san..."

"Stay away."

Ashizawa understood why Tsubaki wanted to keep him at a distance. But he didn't listen. He knew he couldn't leave Tsubaki by himself and he wanted to do whatever he could to help.

"I think the reason that I was so hopelessly attracted to your food is because in some basic way it tastes like Chef Yanaginuma's food."

"Shut up!"

"I'm not saying it's the same as his. But the new restaurant Chef Yanaginuma wants to make is a lot like *Individu*."

"You're lying."

Tsubaki didn't want him to deny it. He wanted Ashizawa to confirm it. Ashizawa heard that in his voice.

"I'm not lying. Why was I so attracted to your food? Why did I need to have you for the restaurant? I thought about it and I found my answer."

Ashizawa gently held Tsubaki's cut hand, trying not to startle him, and pressed his tongue against the wound, with all his love.

The cut wasn't as deep as he'd thought. There was just enough blood to taste, spreading a slight coppery taste through his mouth.

"Stop that."

Tsubaki's voice shook.

"I'm sure that you wanted to make your food and

restaurant the exact opposite of what your father had, since you hated and resented him so much. But Chef Yanaginuma regrets the past and the restaurant he wants to create now is a lot like your feelings. Does that make sense?"

Ashizawa covered Tsubaki's trembling hand with both of his own. Tsubaki's other hand covered his face. But he was looking at Ashizawa desperately, as if clinging to him.

He had felt this hand and the man it belonged to only a few days earlier. It had taunted him, driven him, and made him come again and again. Ashizawa had hated it. And now, that same wounded face was staring at him again.

He decided Tsubaki was a very sneaky man.

Ashizawa was the one who wanted to cry, who wanted to get mad and blame someone. But when Tsubaki looked at him with that face, he couldn't say anything.

His awkwardness, his cowardice, his stubbornness: it was all to hide this fragile person.

"Ashizawa..."

Tsubaki reached toward Ashizawa's cheek with his hand, enfolded in Ashizawa's own, and stroked it tenderly. Ashizawa's body thrilled to the slight desire in his gesture.

"Ashizawa."

Tsubaki repeated his name and slowly pulled his face closer. He stroked around Ashizawa's eyes and nose, as if reassuring himself, then rubbed his nose against Ashizawa's. As the immediate warmth of his



body came through to him, Ashizawa's body stiffened. Tsubaki frowned and let out a sigh.

"I'm sorry."

Ashizawa didn't need to ask what for. Ashizawa's entire body was warm, as if a fire had been lit by the reawakening sensations.

"Are you mad?"

Tsubaki sprinkled Ashizawa's face with kisses as he asked but how could Ashizawa say he was angry when he was doing that? He shook his head very slightly.

"I was so furious that night I couldn't control myself. But my feelings are real."

His fingers slipped from Ashizawa's chin down his throat to the buttons on his vest.

"What are you doing?"

"Do I have to explain?"

Tsubaki paused in unbuttoning his vest, his face close to Ashizawa's.

He was only inches—fractions of an inch away

Each time he blinked, Ashizawa felt his eyelashes and their breath mingled. His heart pounded wildly. He was sure Tsubaki would feel it beating any second.

"But I—uh—"

"Don't run."

His words were as forceful as last time, but his eyes were heart-rendingly tender as he gazed at Ashizawa. His fingers stroking the back of his head and tracing the buttons of his vest were tender, too.

"Tsubaki-san..."

"Please—don't run away."

Tsubaki's voice was desperate and his body began to tremble. He reached his hand under the collar of Ashizawa's shirt and slowly pulled it down around his arms. He pressed passionate kisses into the bare skin of his shoulders.

"You always tell me what I want to hear."

Tsubaki licked his collarbone.

"I do?"

"Ever since you first set foot in the restaurant."

Tsubaki's tongue began to slowly move downward, tracing around his nipples and flicking over them.

"But all I did was tell you what I thought of your food."

"You noticed the things I wanted people to notice. In the sauce, the meat, everything."

Tsubaki used his tongue to lick all over that part of Ashizawa, making him so wet that his skin glistened strangely in the restaurant's light. He rolled his finger over the other nipple.

"And when you offered me the new restaurant, it was like you'd seen into my soul."

"Mm—"

All the feelings that Ashizawa had wanted to express had come through to Tsubaki. That made him happy.

Tsubaki's lips pressed sweetly against Ashizawa's. He cleared away the vase fragments and laid Ashizawa on the floor. Ashizawa's back flinched away from the cold tiles, but Tsubaki stroked him slowly with his big hands.

It was completely unlike the last time. The caresses

infused with love and tenderness filled Ashizawa's heart.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"And you...just did it again."

He reached down and quickly pulled down Ashizawa's zipper.

"About my dad."

"You're not mad? That I butted in?"

"Why would I be?"

Tsubaki continued his flurry of sweet kisses as he pulled Ashizawa's pants down. Ashizawa fought back his twinge of embarrassment and helped Tsubaki get them off.

"Really?"

"When I was young, I didn't understand how my dad could act that way. But now that I've thrown myself into the same work, part of me understands."

His gentle hand swept over Ashizawa's naked nerves, sliding from the base to the tip, pumping all his affection into Ashizawa.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"But even though I understood, I couldn't just forget what happened. He didn't even come home while my mom was suffering. He never looked back once, even when she cried. I only started this work to get back at him. I decided I would take the opposite path from his path. But before I realized it, I was obsessed with my dream, too. And..."

Tsubaki stopped moving and Ashizawa reached out to him with both hands.

"Your restaurant is kind-hearted."

He stroked Tsubaki's cheeks, tracing gently to his eyes, then lifting his body to kiss his lips.

"It was always relaxing to come and eat your food. I think everyone who comes to Individu feels that way."

"Ashizawa—"

Ashizawa's heart was filled with serenity, unlike the way his body was reacting.

"And the staff all feel that way, too. Shibata-san, Masatsuka-san, and Takagi-kun were all drawn in by your cooking and your personality to be here with you."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Why are you here? Just for your job?" Tsubaki asked, looking serious. That hurt Ashizawa and he pinched the man's nose in annoyance.

"Wh—why did you do that?"

"I think you know."

Ashizawa sat up and smacked both Tsubaki's cheeks at once.

"If it were just for my job, would I lie here and let you do this to me?"

"Ashizawa..."

Ashizawa wanted to laugh at how hesitant Tsubaki looked.

"And last time, too. Did you really think I wouldn't be mad about you doing that to me?"

"No," Tsubaki shook his head and dropped his eyes. "I thought you were mad."

The words slipped from him painfully. His reaction was so endearing that Ashizawa wanted to cry.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"I didn't think you'd forgive me. I thought you'd never come back to the restaurant. I thought I'd never see you again. I didn't think I could ever face you."

"Did you hate me that much?" Ashizawa asked softly as Tsubaki began to shake.

"No!" He shook his head emphatically. "No—no! You—you were so important to me..."

Tsubaki forced the words out of himself in a wavering voice. "But the second you started talking about my father, I just lost it. I didn't know what I was doing."

He put a hand to his lips. He was struggling to find the words.

"My hatred and my love got all mixed up and before I knew it...we'd had sex."

His low voice sent an aching thrill through Ashizawa's hips.

"Tsubaki-san —"

"I wasn't trying to hurt you. I just—I didn't want to lose you. I wanted to make you mine."

His feud with his father must have run much deeper and involved more complex, varied emotions than Ashizawa had thought.

He had survived on his hatred and resentment of his father. But then he had grown up and gone into French cooking, just like his father. That showed what a strong influence his father the chef, who he barely knew, had had on him.

Tsubaki had begun to understand what he couldn't understand as a child. His respect had perhaps been born in the same instant—but if he acknowledged it,

the emotions that had fueled his life to that point would disappear.

"I—I love you, Tsubaki-san."

He pulled Tsubaki's hand away from his mouth and kissed his wound once more.

"Ashizawa—"

"Do you love me?"

"I..."

"All I want to hear is yes or no. No excuses. So please—tell me. Do you love me or not?"

He asked, gently kissing Tsubaki's fingers.

Ashizawa imagined that the only reason Tsubaki's forehead wrinkled like that was because he liked it. Tsubaki's desire announced itself to him between their bodies.

"Tsubaki-san —"

Ashizawa called to the man who wouldn't speak, pressuring him. He started to kiss his cut again, but Tsubaki pressed his lips against Ashizawa's. He held his arm and pushed his head back to the floor.

"Mmf—mm."

Tsubaki roughly tangled his tongue with Ashizawa's, as if he were trying to devour his heart.

Violently, determinedly—Ashizawa wanted him to press further.

"I adore you."

Tsubaki spoke the words in a moan, brushing Ashizawa's frenzied lower body.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"I adore you. Love isn't strong enough to express it. I adore you, Ashizawa."

He took a tight hold of Ashizawa's organ then.

"Ah—!"

"Stay with me forever. Please."

Tsubaki pulled his own organ free of his clothes impatiently and pressed it against Ashizawa's lower body. It felt so hot Ashizawa thought he would be burned—and he remembered the pain of the first time. His body pulled away instinctively.

"It's too hard?"

Tsubaki noticed immediately and looked at him pleadingly. *Sneaky.* Ashizawa would never be able to refuse a face like that.

He cared about Tsubaki much, much more than Tsubaki suspected.

"Tsubaki-san—"

"I know I'm forcing you to do this...but I need to be sure."

Ashizawa's heart skipped and something deep inside his body ached.

"Ashizawa—"

Tsubaki's voice tickled sweetly over Ashizawa's ear, making him twitch inside.

"Please..."

Ashizawa didn't have enough self-control to resist his whispered words, and he was already eager.

"Are you going to take responsibility?"

Tsubaki's eyes widened in surprise for a moment, then he smiled heartwarmingly.

"Yeah."

"For everything? For absolutely everything?"

"I get it."



Tsubaki looked at Ashizawa affectionately and Ashizawa felt his heart melting. Seeing Tsubaki looking so happy, it was obvious that anyone would have agreed. Anyone would have forgiven him anything he asked.

Besides, Ashizawa had already tasted everything that was in the man.

"I'll take responsibility for everything."

A searing warmth assaulted his body in the same moment as the whisper.

"Ah!"

In one thrust, Tsubaki pushed all the way into Ashizawa's body.

He could hear the man's powerful heartbeats through his body. Ashizawa throbbed, but he felt the pleasure seeping into his flesh.

Tsubaki pushed that tight space open and filled it with himself. He gave Ashizawa everything that he wanted. His food, his heart, himself...

"I adore you," he whispered as he pushed against Ashizawa's body. His tip pressed against something deep inside Ashizawa and a ticklish sensation spread through his entire body.

This was nothing like the last time.

Ashizawa couldn't deny he felt pleasure that time too, but he wasn't reacting the same way now. This time, it wasn't just his body. He felt loved all the way to his heart.

"Ashizawa—"

Tsubaki's hand circled to the front of Ashizawa's body and gripped that part of him that pulsed steadily with fluid, stroking it slowly.

"Ah—ngh!"

"Do you feel me? All of me?"

As his pace grew wilder, Ashizawa reached out with both hands to hold onto Tsubaki's arms, but his skin was slippery with sweat and his hands kept slipping.

Tsubaki's hips pounded up and down rapidly, thrilling the flesh of Ashizawa's body and reducing his thoughts to a frenzied haze.

He was happy—it felt so good...he couldn't hold on to any other thoughts.

"I adore you!"

With this gasped whisper, the two released the full force of their feelings at the same moment.

Breathing roughly, Tsubaki's body sank heavily into Ashizawa's arms. But even as Tsubaki released himself inside Ashizawa, he didn't diminish. Responding to the relaxation of his walls, Ashizawa felt him begin to slowly harden again.

"Tsubaki-san," Ashizawa begged hoarsely.

Tsubaki smirked. "Sorry. One more time."

He held Ashizawa's powerless hips tightly and began to pound into him more roughly than before.

"That's—ah—ahh!"

Before they could utter resistance, Tsubaki had sealed Ashizawa's lips and he taunted him with his tongue.

Ashizawa's organ had gushed with so much fluid when he ejaculated that when Tsubaki held it in his hand, it made a disgusting squishing noise. But it started to grow hard again.

There was a childlike desperation in Tsubaki's

efforts that forced Ashizawa to give up his will to resist, and turn his body over to him to do with as he wished.

Chapter Nine

The restaurant was closed on Sunday.

By consensus of the Individu staff, Ashizawa and Tsubaki had decided to meet Yanaginuma face to face to discuss the proposal with him directly.

Tsubaki had been against the idea. He was pleased with the offer, but said it would be too hard to take care of two restaurants.

Shibata delivered the final blow that convinced Tsubaki to meet Yanaginuma.

"You can't let me take care of the restaurant?"

This modest man who usually followed Tsubaki's lead spoke his mind clearly now.

"Of course, I know I don't have the same talent or creativity as you, but I can recreate your dishes more faithfully than anyone. Can't you trust me?"

Tsubaki wanted to try something new, but he didn't want to give up Individu. Tsubaki had been having second thoughts and Shibata's words decided him. He had wanted to help Shibata become independent for a long time.

But if things didn't go well with Yanaginuma in this meeting, everything would go back to the way it had been before.

Tsubaki had come to the Grand Royale with Ashizawa. They stood outside its entrance now.

Tsubaki's expression was strained. He hadn't seen Yanaginuma since just after starting high school. They had talked a few times after that on the phone, but they hadn't spoken once since Tsubaki graduated from culinary school.

That made it at least ten years.

He had probably never tasted Yanaginuma's cooking. That thought alone put Ashizawa in a complex state of mind and made his heart ache.

"Are you all right, Tsubaki-san?"

"...Yeah."

Ashizawa squeezed Tsubaki's big hand tightly, but discreetly so that no one would see. As if in response to Ashizawa's encouragement, Tsubaki nodded firmly.

They crossed the thick carpet and a man in a tailcoat appeared.

"We've been expecting you, gentlemen. Unfortunately, Yanaginuma-san has been slightly delayed with business. I'll show you to the room, though, and you can wait there."

Ashizawa's eyes met Tsubaki's for a moment, then he nodded to the man.

"Thank you."

The two sat across from each other at a table that could seat six or eight people. Looking around the room, Tsubaki let out a small sigh. He was wearing a suit today and a neatly knotted tie. He had his glasses on and his hair was carefully combed. Ashizawa felt like he was sitting with a whole different person and felt a little shy.

"What's wrong?"

A dubious look came over Tsubaki's face at the

way Ashizawa was acting.

"This is the first time I've ever seen you in a suit, Tsubaki-san. It's strange."

"You don't like it?"

"No, quite the opposite." Ashizawa corrected him hastily and now it was Tsubaki's turn to blush.

"Don't look so serious when you say something like that."

Ashizawa watched the color suffuse his cheeks. He put his hands on his knees and shrank into his shoulders.

After the two had lost themselves in their lovemaking Friday night, they'd gone back to Tsubaki's apartment and done it again.

Ashizawa's mind had become hazy and incapable of forming a complete thought, but he knew that Tsubaki needed to do this. He had been willing to accept him into his limp body.

The day after, the staff had met again and now here they were at the Grand Royale.

"Is there something in it for me if I say it less seriously?"

"Come on..."

There was a knock on the door behind them and the *maitre d'* appeared.

"Compliments of the chef."

He set a white plate bearing the logo of the Grand Royale on the table. In the center were arranged rectangular, flaky pastries—*millefeuilles*.

When they saw this, Ashizawa's and Tsubaki's eyes met.

"We've been told you like these, Ashizawa-san."

"Y yes. It's my favorite."

"Would you like something to drink? Champagne perhaps?"

Ashizawa considered the effects alcohol might have on their serious discussion, but decided it was best to have something to relieve Tsubaki's stress.

"Very good."

Resting on the plate before them were seafood *millefeuilles*. The dish that had revealed to Tsubaki the identity of the owner Ashizawa had been hiding from him.

There was no other food: just this single plate. What could it mean? As if searching for the answer to that, Ashizawa looked up at Tsubaki.

Sure enough, deep lines creased his forehead and his lips were pressed into a thin line as he stared down at the plate. Even when the champagne was brought and his glass was filled with the light effervescent liquid, his expression didn't change.

"Tsubaki-san," Ashizawa said softly, and Tsubaki finally looked up.

"Sorry."

He knew what he'd been doing, apparently.

Ashizawa shrugged. "They made them for us—shall we try them?"

"Oh, yes. You're right."

Seafood *millefeuille* isn't a very hard dish to prepare.

Basically, the cook puts a good amount of seafood between two pie crusts, drizzles some sauce on it, and

it's done. Since there's usually very little change in the preparation, it's quite rare to find any with a truly outstanding flavor.

Its very simplicity showcases the restaurant and the chef's talent.

And the sauce, which plays a decisive role, is essential.

What made the seafood *millefeuille* at the Grand Royale the best for Ashizawa was its sauce. It had a light, melt-on-your-tongue texture and wasn't too heavy. It set off the flavor of the seafood better than anything else in his experience. The choice between shrimp, crab, or salmon also had a profound effect. Cutting into the pastry with his knife, there was a delicious, crisp sound.

The most amazing thing about the crust here was that even though it was crisp, it didn't flake apart.

He scooped up seafood, vegetables, and pie crust. He added plenty of sauce and brought it to his mouth. This sauce made from scampi stock must have taken a lot of work, too. The rich, aromatic flavor spread through his mouth.

"It's really good, huh?"

The *millefeuille* he'd had at Musigny paled beside this. There were probably a lot of restaurants and chefs with better recipes than Yanaginuma's. But in general terms, Yanaginuma's taste was invested with the form, quality, and flavor of a *grande maison*.

Ashizawa was satisfied by the depth of the flavor, which seemed more profound than usual.

And it went well with the bubbly champagne.

"What do you think, Tsubaki-san? My very

favorite seafood *millefeuille* tastes pretty—.”

Ashizawa looked up to ask Tsubaki's opinion, but he trailed off. Tsubaki was empty-eyed, his fork in his hand.

“Tsubaki-san?”

“Did you find it to your liking?”

At the sound of the voice from the door, Tsubaki started.

“I refined this dish from one that my former wife made for me.”

“Chef Yanaginuma.”

“Actually, my wife was a very good cook and she made many things for my son and I. The composition isn't always the same, but they're on the menu and all quite popular.”

Tsubaki set down his silverware and stood up.

“Did you make this personally, Chef?”

“Yes. I've been in the kitchen for a while.”

Yanaginuma answered Ashizawa's question with a slightly embarrassed smile, still dressed in his chef's coat. Then he turned to look at Tsubaki in silence.

“Shuichiro.”

Tsubaki flinched at the sound of his name.

“This is your mother's cooking. Do you like it? Is it the way you remember it?” Yanaginuma asked gently and Tsubaki gave a soft sigh.

“It's the same.”

“I'm glad.”

Yanaginuma smiled contentedly.

“Shuichiro.”

Yanaginuma moved to stand in front of Tsubaki

and hesitantly took his son's hand. Before Tsubaki could shake him off, he pressed his forehead against the back of his hand.

“I'm sorry for everything.”

His soft, gentle voice filled the room. Ashizawa could see it engulfing Tsubaki.

“I'm...very happy to be able to see you like this.”

Tsubaki said nothing to Yanaginuma's words.

But Ashizawa could see in his eyes a lump in his heart melting away, little by little, as he gazed at his father. Tsubaki let Yanaginuma hold his arm.

“That's good news.”

After hearing the update, Masatsuka was the first to speak.

“Now I can go back there.”

“What?” Ashizawa asked in surprise.

“You didn't know?”

“Know what?”

“I used to be a *sommelier* for the Grand Royale.”

“Really?” Ashizawa sounded even more surprised.

“We saw each other several times there, but I guess I didn't make much of an impression.” Masatsuka sighed deeply.

“Uh, I—I'm sorry. I don't remember you at all.”

“Am I that forgettable as a *sommelier*?”

He slumped his shoulders in disappointment and

Ashizawa hurried to reassure him.

"I—I'm sorry! These two restaurants are totally different!"

"Don't get so flustered. I'm not surprised you don't remember." Masatsuka grinned.

"Why not?"

"I was a *sommelier* there, but I was in charge of serving large parties, so I was hardly ever out on the floor."

"Oh."

"But I still remembered you." Masatsuka smiled.

"How come?"

"I would have to be awfully unprofessional to not recognize the son of Yanaginuma-san's business partner. And anyway, how could I ever forget such a good-looking man?"

Before Masatsuka could touch him, Ashizawa's body was pulled away by Tsubaki.

"That's enough, Masatsuka."

"Jealousy is so unattractive in a man. Don't you agree, Shibata-san?"

"Well, it's understandable. He must be something special if he managed to crack Tsubaki's stubborn old heart." Shibata laughed boisterously.

"Takagi put up a fight, though. He was after Ashizawa-san apparently."

"After me? For what?"

Somehow, after spending a night together, all of their colleagues had found out, so now they faced constant teasing.

"It's better that you don't know."

"So what did you decide to do?"

Shibata forced the conversation back on track. They had only gotten as far in the story as Tsubaki and Yanaginuma calling a truce, though still an imperfect one.

"Tsubaki-san agreed to take on the new restaurant."

"Oh, really!"

"But since this restaurant is still here, we still need to figure out the best option for it."

"What, you're not going to let me run it after all?"

"That's not what I said."

Tsubaki released Ashizawa from his embrace and turned to face Shibata.

"Then what are you saying?"

"The new restaurant will be bigger than this one. I can't run it all by myself. I still need your help, Shibata-san."

"Tsubaki..."

"If you still want to strike out on your own when the time comes, of course..."

"Don't be coy with me, old man."

Shibata reached out to slap Tsubaki's shoulder in embarrassment.

"I'm happy to be your sous-chef a while longer. Once I've stolen all your secrets, I'll set myself up somewhere. Until then, I'll keep looking out for you."

"Thank you."

Tsubaki bowed deeply, then turned to Masatsuka.

"And I can't leave the floor management to an all

new staff. So I want you and Takagi to come, too."

"Oh, well. I suppose we're fated to follow you in life and death."

Masatsuka shrugged and let out a sigh.

"Though I don't know what Yoshihiro has to say about it, of course."

"Just tell him Ashizawa'll be there and he'll follow, tail wagging."

"Never mind Takagi, after all," Tsubaki said quickly, and Masatsuka and Shibata chuckled.

"And what are you planning to do now, Ashizawa-san? Help us, or...?"

"I—"

Ashizawa didn't know what to say.

"If you consider that we need someone who knows everything about the restaurant, like the finances and everything, in order to run it..."

"Yes?"

"You could train at Individu for a little while, then give Chef Yanaginuma your resignation."

"Which sounds easy enough, but I think our chef here is getting a little ahead of himself."

"Um..."

Ashizawa answered Masatsuka's sharp observation with an ambiguous smile.

"Hey, everybody!"

"Be careful, the walls have ears."

Takagi appeared with impeccable timing.

"What's everyone doing? Hey, Ashizawa-san!"

"Hi." Ashizawa greeted Takagi and Tsubaki tugged him back.

"Hey—Tsubaki-san!"

"Takagi, I'm going to give you fair warning."

"What's up, Chef?" Takagi asked, showing no trace of fear as Tsubaki wrapped his arms around Ashizawa.

"He belongs to me. Don't try any funny stuff."

"I know already," Takagi answered breezily.

"As long as you understand."

"Yeah, I like that guy better," Takagi said, raising his finger to point at Masatsuka.

"Please limit your jokes to your hairstyles."

Masatsuka frowned sharply and turned his back on Takagi in annoyance to go into the back room. Takagi followed him.

"But it's not a joke!"

"Better start getting ready to open for dinner."

Shibata pushed himself to his feet and headed into the kitchen.

"I want to help, too, Tsubaki-san."

Ashizawa turned to look at him and Tsubaki easily brushed his lips over Ashizawa's.

"Wh—"

His mouth was sealed and he rolled his eyes to look around the room.

"Nobody's watching," Tsubaki teased. "So can't you kiss me back?" he asked tenderly, laying his hands on Ashizawa's shoulders as he tried to pull away.

Now that Ashizawa had selected his chef, the question of whether he could split himself between the office and Individu depended entirely upon Tsubaki, just as Masatsuka had warned him.

In their meeting with Yanaginuma, Tsubaki had said that without Ashizawa there was no deal. Yanaginuma had eventually folded, but he'd ordered Ashizawa to work at Individu while he stayed on at the office. Considering the costs and regulations governing the project at his company, Ashizawa couldn't contradict Yanaginuma and in the end they had agreed to the compromise.

Of course, for Ashizawa, being with Tsubaki wasn't a problem.

But he was a little sad that Tsubaki was the first person he'd intended to win over who had won him over instead. That's how attracted he was to Tsubaki.

Because Tsubaki, who looked him straight in the eyes, was important to him.

"Man—"

He let out a long-suffering sigh.

"Just for today."

Ashizawa gave Tsubaki the kiss he'd wanted, his heart and body satisfied.

Melt In Your Mouth

When asked what his hobbies were, Masaki Ashizawa could answer without hesitation: "Eating good food." It wasn't quite clear if that was actually his job, or if his hobby had become his job; but either way, he was happy when he was eating good food. And if the person making the food was the person he loved most in the whole world, there could be no greater happiness.

"Thank you for the meal."

Ashizawa put his hands together and formally thanked Shuichiro Tsubaki, who was staring at him.

"What?" Ashizawa asked, noticing his look.

"You looked like you were enjoying it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. No matter what you eat, watching you always cheers me up."

"If I look happy, it's only because your food is so good, Tsubaki-san."

"Masaki?"

"If I ate something I didn't like, I wouldn't be able to look happy even if I tried to. So if I look happy, it's because you go to the trouble of making such good food for me." Ashizawa answered, full of confidence, and Tsubaki put a hand to his forehead.

"I can't believe you sometimes."

"Did I say something strange?"

"If you didn't notice, then never mind."

"What is it? When you say that, I only want to know even more."

"I just realized that if I want to see you look happy, I have to keep slaving away to make good food for you. That's all," Tsubaki said, looking at Ashizawa affectionately.

Ashizawa felt oddly embarrassed. "You don't have to work that hard. Your food today was really good!"

When he suddenly stopped talking, Tsubaki was momentarily silenced by surprise, then he chuckled at how serious Ashizawa looked.

"Why are you laughing? I was being serious."

"Do I look happy to you?"

"What?"

Ashizawa didn't understand what Tsubaki was getting at with this sudden question and he tilted his head.

"When I eat good food, I look happy, right?"

"Yes."

"And my food is good, right?"

"Of course."

"So you wouldn't think it was strange if eating my own food made me happy?"

"I guess it would be, a little. But . . ."

Ashizawa didn't understand what Tsubaki was trying to say.

Tsubaki's food was good and Ashizawa was happy when he ate good food. It seemed like that should work for Tsubaki too, but somehow it didn't seem quite right. Maybe Tsubaki was trying to say that he wasn't satisfied

with his own food. Or...?

"Don't think too hard."

Tsubaki laughed cheerfully and reached out to Ashizawa. His fingers touched Ashizawa's lips and wiped away some leftover sauce. He brought it back to his own lips. As he licked his fingers, a thrill shot through Ashizawa's hips. Tsubaki was just licking off his fingers, but the way his tongue moved was enough to remind Ashizawa of what they'd done the night before. He didn't want Tsubaki to see him thinking such dirty thoughts and he looked down quickly.

"I'm eating the delicious dish I call 'you,'" Tsubaki said, teasing Ashizawa for his shyness. Ashizawa looked back up.

"I just wanted to know if I looked happy eating something so good."

He spoke serenely and a fire erupted inside Ashizawa.

"T Tsubaki-san . . ."

"Come here, Masaki." Tsubaki watched Ashizawa's reaction and smiled happily.

"Can I have more of you? I want to feed my hunger."

His eyes were shining and affectionate, his words sweet, and Ashizawa couldn't resist.

If Shuichiro Tsubaki were asked what his hobby was, he would probably also say, "Eating good food." But for him, Masaki Ashizawa was the only dish that would qualify.

Postscript

I went to a French restaurant for the first time one night in high school to celebrate my birthday.

My parents took me to a place downtown in a big building with a nice view. There were flowers on the pristine white tablecloth and polished silverware laid out in front of beautiful glasses.

I can't recall what I ate and I was clueless about the proper etiquette, but I can still remember the giddy thrill of being in a place where I felt like an adult, like a break from everyday life.

The first French restaurant I went to with my own money was L'Ecrin, in Ginza. That was the first time I experienced the beauty of red wine and cheese. After that, whenever I wanted to break out of the everyday routine, I took myself to French restaurants to reward myself for things.

The beautiful, luxurious interior designs, the jaw-droppingly delicious food, and the polished, elegant movements of the *sommeliers* and waiters always cheered me up.

I hope that after reading this book, you received a taste of that wonderful feeling.

I created Individu and the Grand Royale out of a mixture of several restaurants I've been to like that.

I've got all kinds of crazy ideas (fantasies?)

about what happens next at Individu, with Tsubaki and Ashizawa's relationship, and between Masatsuka and Takagi.

In fact, I told the story of the meeting between Masatsuka and Takagi on the cell phone sites "BL Club" (on au, TU-KA, and Vodafone) and "Boys Club" (on DoCoMo) starting the first week of March 2004.

It was updated every week on Wednesdays. I think you have to pay to access both those sites, but since I made my debut there, I still look forward to updates for a lot of reasons. There are more details on DARIA's website and on my own, so you should be able to find more there.

After my old stories finish their runs, you can read them there.

I'll keep mulling over other parts of this story. I hope I get to write about it again.

To Ms. Yamimaru Enjin: I had been hoping to work with you on a project for such a long, long time, I'm so happy I finally got the opportunity.

The way Ms. Enjin draws her men is so graceful and beautiful, it makes me happy just to look at them. I was totally in love with how sexy Tsubaki looks from behind in his chef's coat and how beautiful Ashizawa is.

Thank you for giving us such lovely pictures when you're so busy.

And to Ms. Hayazawa, my editor, sorry for all the stress I caused you yet again.

It made me so happy to hear you say, "That sounds delicious" after you read the story. We should go get some nice French bread, cheese, and red wine together.

I hope to see you again somewhere soon!

Jinko Fuyuno

My first novel of the year, 2004

Ashizawa

Tsubaki

I'm so hungry for
French food now...



He yanked Ashizawa towards him. Ashizawa's eyes widened, but all he saw were eyes boring into his own. Tsubaki frowned in annoyance and tore his glasses off roughly. Then, just as Ashizawa saw him bringing his face closer, he felt something warm cover his half-opened lips.

Masaki Ashizawa was hired by a restaurant mogul to find a world-class chef for his new French restaurant. He finds the perfect candidate in Shuichiro Tsubaki, the gruff master chef of a small restaurant. But the proud Tsubaki is happy calling the shots in his own business and Ashizawa must go to all-new lengths to convince him to accept the offer.

What will it take for Ashizawa to clinch the deal? And what secret from his past is Tsubaki keeping from Ashizawa?

In the high-stakes world of Tokyo *grande maison* restaurants, Ashizawa discovers that "eat or be eaten" is more than just a business term! Author Jinko Fuyuno invites you into a world of delicious cuisine—and even more delicious men.



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